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ISSUE 01 DECEMBER 2006 THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

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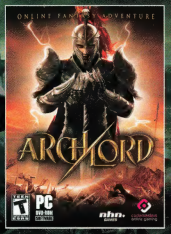

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16 **Letters**
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20 **Start**
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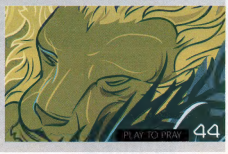
COVER STORY

68 **Dragon Age**
BioWare is back! The once-and-future RPG king never gave up on making PC games...and this month we've got the exclusive scoop to prove it. *Dragon Age* is the spiritual successor to the classic role-playing game *Baldur's Gate*. And by the end of 2007 or early 2008, you'll be playing it.



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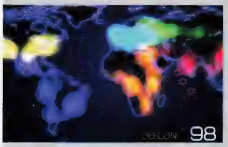

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XTRAS

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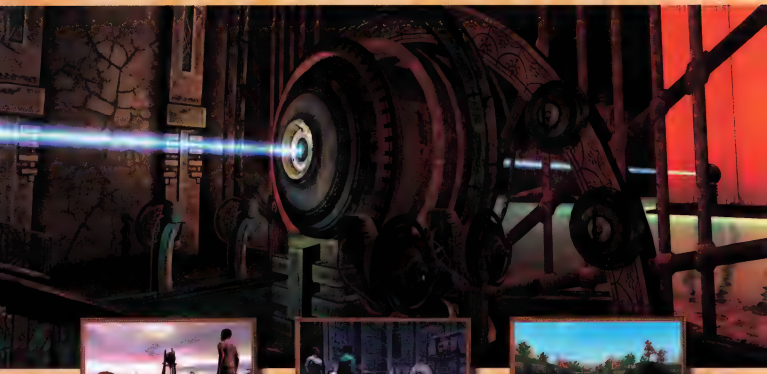

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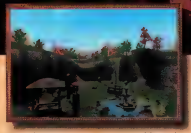

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NEW DAY RISING

Or, *GFW:TOM* FTW!

Hi there! My name is Jeff Green, and you might know me from such magazines as *Computer Gaming World*, where I served as editor-in-chief for the past five years. In fact, until just a few weeks ago, the magazine you now hold in your hands *was Computer Gaming World*. So, if you always hated that magazine and bought this one instead as an alternative, well, ha-ha! We tricked you!

But whether or not you loved us, hated us, bothered reading us, or never even heard of us is now rendered moot, as we are, essentially, getting into the magazine we call Computer Gaming World for 21 years—from November 1981 until November 2006—has now become, starting with this issue, *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine*.

What does this mean? Why would we do such a thing? And what's in it for Microsoft? Good questions! You're not as stupid as you look.

What it means, first, is that PC gaming as we all know it and love it is finally being taken seriously by the company that gave us the platform on which most of you play our games. Microsoft wants "Games for Windows" to be just as big as Xbox and PlayStation and Nintendo games are. Having an official name for the platform—and an official magazine to go with it—is a way to show that commitment. For those of us at The Magazine Formerly Known as *CGW*, it means a much higher profile and a much bigger audience with whom we can share our words—which is all any writer or artist ever wants.

The cool thing, and the thing I really need you to understand above all, is that *Microsoft does not approve or even read what we write before it goes to the printer*. We have complete editorial independence here, despite that big honkin' Windows logo on the front cover. *CGW* was always known for its brutal honesty and integrity, and I promise you that's not changing one iota. It was one of the main reasons Microsoft picked us in the first place: They knew our reputation was unassailable.

So here we are. Issue No. 1. Does it rule? Does it suck? You won't know until you turn the page. So go ahead. Happy reading, and, as always, let us know what you think.

Jeff Green
Editor-in-Chief
Games for Windows: The Official Magazine

Now playing: *Vanguard* beta, *World of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade* beta, *Company of Heroes*
1UP.com Blog: GFWinIT.1UP.com

MEET THE STAFF

SEAN MOLLOY
MANAGING EDITOR

Sean spends far too much time in Azeroth and answers every question with, "How appropriate. You fight like a cow."

Now Playing: *World of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade* beta
1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.1UP.com

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES/TECH)

Darren was considering playing *Battlefield 2142* in all its PlanetSide-ish glory. That is, until he read the adware notice packaged in the box.

Now Playing: *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic, Sam & Max: Culture Shock*
1UP.com Blog: GFWDarren.1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (REVIEWS/EXTEND)

Ryan is, without question, the finest *GFW* editor to ever be featured in this space on this page in this issue. He wishes to thank *Ultima Online*, *Oregon Trail*, and pre-1996 Sierra for making it all possible.

Now Playing: *Guild Wars Nightfall*
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (STAFF)

Buggy, barbed, and badass by turns, Battlefield 1942 is the cat for unraveling dysfunctional relationship. Shawn's still addicted to *Company of Heroes* as well.

Now Playing: *Battlefield 2142*, *Company of Heroes*
1UP.com Blog: GFWShawn.1UP.com

LOGAN PARR
FILEFRONT LIAISON

Now that *Sam & Max* has made a comeback, Logan is hoping Edna's [illegible] is up next.

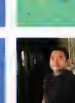
Let's keep our fingers crossed.

Now playing: *Phantasy Star Online, Sam & Max: Culture Shock*
1UP.com Blog: Logan_Sun.1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR

So here it is folks, a new magazine design. It's a beautiful thing...or just a thing? It's your magazine now so let me know what you really think at michael_jennings@ziffdavis.com.

Now Playing: Pray
1UP.com Blog: GFWJennings.1UP.com



GERRY SERRANO
DESIGNER

Vixann + Red Bull + NoDoz + cappuccino + Pop Rocks + whiskey + Magic Markers + Tums + rancid Chinese food = *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine*.

Now Playing: Gnarls Barkley, Beck, Jo La Tonya, and the goodie bucket

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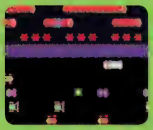

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Letters

Where The People stick it to The Man

LETTER OF THE MONTH

WHAT'S IN A NAME?
Now all those people running Windows 98 and Windows ME can get the last reviews of Solitaire for 2000 and previews of Minesweeper for Vista. Once they pick up their new minesweepers from Best Buy, they might even be able to run online Boggle, and Games for Windows: The Official Magazine will be right there for them. December will be a very important turning point. I hope the changes your name implies do not occur.

Steve

* A special sneak peek at next month's cover story. (Note: We're kidding.)

Well, the proof is in the pudding, and you're holding the pudding, so make sure you wash up afterward. But hopefully once you've leafed through this issue, you'll figure out that, yes, there's a lot more to "Games for Windows" than *Solitaire*.

WHAT'S IN A NAME? (REPRISE)

So what should we call you? *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine*? *GWOM*? *GFWTOM*? Or *TMFKACGW*?

Ernesto Duran

Call us *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine* if we're out at a formal dinner, *GFW* if we're just hanging out watching *Veronica Mars*. And yes, we know the letter "W" has more syllables than the word "Windows."

As for *TMFKACGW*—yes, indeed, as of last month, all the folks who make this magazine were working on The Magazine Formerly Known as *Computer Gaming World*. We're not gonna pretend we weren't. Just to prove it, we've still got a big sack of mail with the old address to sort through....

NOSTALGIC YELLOW

Reading through the November issue made me realize just how late I entered PC gaming. It's true that this is a matter of when I was born, but seldom has the true weight of what I've missed out on landed so heavily. I was born a console child alongside the straightforward hardware conventions of Power, Reset, and the A and B buttons. It was accessibility at its best, especially for someone who used to considered a monitor a "computer."

Summer blockbusters wax and wane, yet we still find solace and questioning in *Lawrence of Arabia*. *New York Times* best-sellers sweep the nation, and still Hugo's hunchback climbs those lonely towers. For all of today's glitter, I can't help but think of the gold I have yet to discover, even though computer gaming may not have quite the same established history.

If nothing else, the final issue of *Computer Gaming World* inspired me to want to dig deeper than I have before and try in earnest to slow down my twitch-happy mouse finger. There's a substantial portion of strategy to be planned, foreign seas to explore, and mile-high soaring to be done, and I want to try and taste it before I grow old and sore and start distressing how we've lost those good ol' *Battlefield 2* days.

Jesse Hebert

NATIONAL PRIDE

Goofy caricatures take the sting out of any genocide.

I just read Bruce Geryk's review of the *Civilization IV: Warlords* expansion in the October 2006 issue of *Computer Gaming World* (page 88). I am glad to see that I was not the only one who found the inclusion of Joseph Stalin in that expansion to be of "questionable taste."

As a Russian-American whose family was directly affected by Stalin's purges, frankly I find Stalin's inclusion as a leader of the Russian civilization to be patently offensive. I was glad that Stalin and other Bolshevik leaders haven't been present in recent incarnations of *Civilization*, which makes sense anyway, considering that under the Bolsheviks, Russia ceased to exist as an independent state until it regained independence in 1991. So not only did Stalin not lead "Russia" as such, but he wasn't even Russian—he was Georgian.

I understand that, given the expansion's *Warlords* name, Firaxis Games wanted to include a leader who could be considered a "warlord." But as Bruce pointed out, they wisely didn't include Adolf Hitler for Germany—so why include Stalin, who was no better than Hitler? If they wanted a Russian warlord, Firaxis could have included one of the Russian Grand Princes like Alexander Nevsky or Dmitri Donskoy, whose names aren't associated with the deaths of tens of millions of people. I wouldn't have had a problem if this expansion was specifically devoted to WWII, in which case the inclusion of Stalin and Hitler would have been accurate for historical reasons, but having Stalin as the leader of Russia in an overall context is irresponsible—and I certainly won't be buying that expansion unless Firaxis issues a patch to remove Stalin.

Ivan Roman

Lest we forget, Stalin also made an appearance in the original *Civilization*, too—but we agree that it's a tad bizarre to allow players the ability to play one of history's greatest monsters but not another. We'd love to see the balance spreadsheets and white boards where Firaxis weighed *that* decision. >

MAIL BYTES

Like the humble hummingbird acts as a sexual intermediary for flowers (I think), you deliver the game information I so lust for.

Daniel Soliman

Why don't more developers make story-driven FPS games (such as *F.E.A.R.* and *Half-Life 2*) with co-op modes?

Dang

Where is today's version of *Star Control*? Where is my new *Starflight*? Where is my 21st-century version of *The Ancient Art of War at Sea*? Why did they screw up *Master of Orion 3*?

Eric J Massonno

Where you are headed, there is no map.

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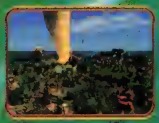

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LESS IS MORE?

I don't get it. How could so many cranially challenged people think axing game ratings is a good idea? Removing information is good? Really? If you don't like the scores, look away. If you don't have time to read the full reviews, look at the scores. What's the problem? Isn't everyone happy?

The star rating doesn't substitute for a written review, it complements it. I've bought games I never would have considered if the rating hadn't enticed me into reading the full review.

Jeff Packer

The great thing about magazine redesigns is they let you hit the reset button—and when you flip to the Reviews section about two-thirds of the way through this magazine, you'll see that's exactly what we did. The *Computer Gaming World* Viewpoint section was a grand experiment, and we think it was a successful one. We learned a ton. And the *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine* Reviews and Extend sections reap the rewards.

GAMING FOR DUMMIES

Yet again another computer-game magazine back-page writer admits to playing games on easy mode—first Robert Coffey and now Jeff Green (see Greenspeak, *CGW* #267, page 110). I know that you magazine editors actually have to finish games to write about them—however, for many of us, playing a game is more about the process then the conclusion. For those of you who remember, it used to be that the only place to play a decent video game was at the arcade. Back then, if you died, you didn't start from your last save—you started from the very beginning of the game. Yet you kept putting quarters in that one one-dimensional game so that you could finally get to the part were the alien ships were no longer a boring rectangle and instead became a cool octagon.

I know we live in a culture of instant gratification, but the more I have to strain my rational and creative faculties to beat a level, the more satisfied I am with the result. And I personally play all my games on hard mode—not because I want to show how cool I am, but because I want to keep playing the really good games for many years to come. I still have games on my hard drive from over five years ago. While some you cruise through the best games of all time, just to say you finished them, people like me are still blissfully anticipating the thought of playing them.

Colin Maicher

How lovely for you that you yearn for days when a rectangle becoming an octagon was considered cool. We, however, like to think games have evolved since then—games these days tend to be much more rich and complex, with a lot more variety. And we're overwhelmed by the tons and tons of good games in our libraries just sitting there left totally unplayed. Which brings up another issue: Games are just too damn long these days. But that's a rant for another time.

But gaming for all of us is about the "process," not the conclusion…otherwise, we'd just input a level-skip code to see the ending. It's just that some of us find the "process" of dying due to unfair situations or poor level design over and over and over again patently unenjoyable.

I think that you have just expressed some of the biggest distinctions between "mature" gamers and actual n00b gamers. Like the benevolent martial-arts masters of so many cheesy films circa 1970, gamers like me (I'm almost 37 and have been gaming since I was 14) are somewhat tired of repetitive clichés when it comes to formulas for gaming.

I want to be able to play a game *any way* I want to, not the way the designers intended, even more so when the game design is full of artificial devices and unflexible gimmicks.

I bought *Doom 3* and after one hour found the cheat codes and played through. For me, the enjoyment came from the physics and the lighting effects, not so much from shooting the demons. My game consisted in walking the map, appreciating what the designers did. The same goes for *Far Cry* and many more.

So I subscribe to your war cry! Do you want me to play your game? Challenge *my* skills, don't make me think like a game designer and figure out what the designer intended to do. Give me hours of gameplay, not reload screens and already walked maps!

Juan Pousada

THE DEVIL YOU KNOW

My friend told me that *Diablo III* is coming out in November of this year. Of course, I don't believe him, and I have heard that *Diablo III* was already created but Blizzard didn't like the end result so they are redoing it. So is there any chance that Blizzard will get it together and get *Diablo III* finished?

Tom Goldrick

You were right not to believe him—about the release date, anyway. Blizzard's got to get *World of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade* out the door first. But it'd be foolish to think Blizzard's *not* working on *Diablo III* or whatever they'll call it in some secret hole in Irvine, CA—it's only one of the most lucrative and critically acclaimed franchises in PC-gaming history. But don't be too surprised if you're not playing it until 2008. Or 2009. Or 2010…

In the meantime, a big band of ex–*Diablo II* developers (including former Blizzard VP Bill Roper) founded a new studio called Flagship to make *Hellgate: London*, a sort of 3D "spiritual successor" to *Diablo II*. Read about it in our "Top 10 2007" article on page 20.

The phrase "spiritual successor" is real popular these days. See how many times you can spot it in this issue!

Oh no they didn't. Oh yes they did.

WAR!

WTF! *Halo Wars* is only for the Xbox 360? It had better not be! How could Ensemble Studios do this to us? After all those *Age of Empires* games? I've played *Age of Empires* since I was, like, 6 years old.

Tim Camey

First of all, thanks for making us all feel really, really old. Second of all, we shared your moment of panic and frustration when we first heard that the guys at Ensemble, mavens of PC real-time strategy, were making a new RTS game for the Xbox 360. So we asked Ensemble what's up…see what they didn't tell us on page 34.

REIN IT IN

In the October issue, Mark Rein blames Intel for the proliferation of moderately powered computers that "suck for playing decent games." Nonsense. Decent games don't necessarily need high-end rigs. Didn't Mr. Rein consider that the problem lies with publishers constantly focusing on games with bleeding-edge graphics?

You don't need cutting-edge graphics—or even 3D graphics—for great gameplay. Any longtime gamer knows that. Instead of repatedly selling us more of the same with fancy new window dressing that requires a graphics card upgrade, why not create something original that puts the gameplay before the eye candy?

Samhain

We review one such game in this issue, you crazy Celtic holiday you. Check page 98.

WEIRD AL, IS THAT YOU?

Maybe it's just me, but looking at the characters in *Team Fortress 2*, especially the engineer, I keep waiting for them to break into a Dire Straits song.

I want my…I want my…I want my TF2
*See the little ****** with the sniper rifle*
*That little ****** tried to head-shot me*
That ain't playin', that ain't the way to do it
Concussion jumpin' crossing klicks for free
We got to invade enemy bases
Blue-flag delivery-y-y-y-y-y-y-y
I got to heal my hurtin' teammates
The medic class is the one for meeeeeee.

Jeff Clineff

We used to hate that song. Now we hate it slightly less. Thanks!

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Start

News, Previews, and Pert Opinion

PREVIEW FEATURE

Delays pushed the most promising PC releases well into 2007. Here's our list of standouts and stumpers, with a healthy dose of unflinching analysis to boot.

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Murder in the Middle Ages—from the makers of *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time.*

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David Cage

Indigo Prophecy maker muses on emotionally engaging games.

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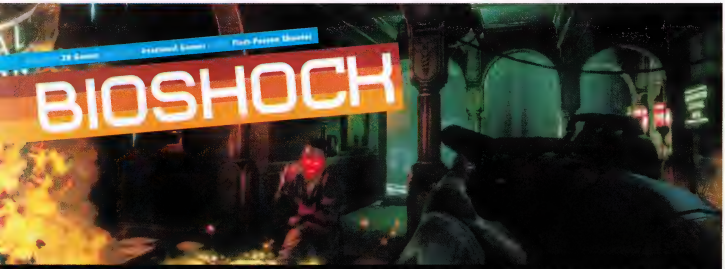
2007

GFW TOP TEN ONLINE POLL:

We picked our faves, you put 'em in order. Which of the following '07 releases are readers most amped for?

1. BioShock (23%)
2. Half-Life 2: Episode Two/ Team Fortress 2 (22%)
3. Spore (21%)
4. Crysis (8%)
5. Alan Wake (8%)
6. Enemy Territory: Quake Wars (5%)
7. Hellgate: London (5%)
8. Command & Conquer 3 (3%)
9. Supreme Commander (3%)
10. Pirates of the Burning Sea (2%)

SOURCE: POLL CONDUCTED ON GAMEINFORMS.COM FORUMS ON [illegible]



WHAT'S PROMISING: Irrational creative director Ken Levine describes the underwater city of Rapture in *BioShock* as an emergent world that listens to you. Rolling your eyes? Don't, unless your two *least* favorite games were *Thief* and *System Shock 2*. Instead of narrow mazes or vacuous open areas with at best cosmetic interactivity, *BioShock* presents a free-form A.I. ecology modeling desperate mutant factions scrapping for footing in the debris of a failed utopia. The world "listens" by subtly responding to how you play, whether that's shooting, using genetic powers, hacking machines to craft items, taking over security systems, or just messing with the impromptu A.I. At heart, Levine's a storyteller first and a technician second, so we're predicting all the pimp-mapped visuals and A.I. goodies in the world won't trump the narrative surprises his team's brewing for this one.

POTENTIAL PRATFALLS: Calling *BioShock* "a stake in the heart of run-down-the-corridor [shooters]" is well and fun, but we've heard that sort of tough talk before, and we've already seen elements of it in horror-shooters like *F.E.A.R.* With up-and-comers like *Crysis*—another FPS touting ecological A.I., but in a massively open-ended and deformable environment—*BioShock* needs to do more than step you between static A.I. scenarios (disconnected from each other) or wow you with killer water effects. We're not expecting *Grand Theft Auto*, but when we see that scrawny Little Sister emerge from an air duct and climb onto the shoulder of a hulking Big Daddy, we want to believe she continues to exist long after we've silently crept by to other places.

WHAT WE DIDN'T KNOW: "*BioShock* will redefine what people expect from a first-person shooter. I know that sounds ambitious. So, we're either really ambitious or really stupid." *–Ken Levine, president/cofounder, Irrational Games* ● **Matt Peckham**

WHAT'S PROMISING: You're traveling through another dimension, one not only of sight and sound, but of mind, a journey into a wondrous land whose boundaries are that of imagination—you've just crossed over into...the Will Wright zone. If there's one game in 2007 that's on our minds, it's this one. You start as a single-celled thingamabob, then "evolve" into a multicellular thingamabob, and eventually spread your thingamabob civilization across the galaxy. Features include Pixar-style animation tools, socialization and mating models, and even in-game creature data stats you can print and play as an independent card game (can you say franchise?). What's more, the game actually redesigns itself as you play, transforming to complement your personality and skill level. Wright calls *Spore* a "massively single-player game," which means it can dynamically integrate content built by other players based on play-style similarities. (We deny responsibility for the platypus-that-can-kiss-its-own-ass species that'll be popping up postrelease.)

POTENTIAL PRATFALLS: Three words: *Black & White*. Listening to Robin Williams go gaga during *Spore* demos is great (note: Williams loved *Black & White*, too), but turning a geeky biology demo into something as intuitive as *The Sims* is a whole other ball of assembly code. Then there's the *Oblivion* question—big and beautiful and *procedural* as Bethesda's mega-RPG is, it's still a lot of monster bashing and pony expressing around its world. *Spore* needs to transcend the "conquer everything" convention if it's after more than the usual RTS kudos.

WHAT WE DIDN'T KNOW: French writer Honoré de Balzac once said, "Bureaucracy is a giant mechanism operated by pygmies." As the potential cash windfalls for game IP explode, big-dog publishers are clamping down on the flow of information between development studios and the press. Call it PR or just "Pretty Ridiculous," in *Spore*'s case, what we didn't know was that the new game in gametown is called "hide the designer." The rules? Six-month info blackout. ● **MP**

Team Fortress Classic's Dustbowl map redone for Team Fortress 2.

HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE TWO/ TEAM FORTRESS 2

Valve/L4D Valve Team Fortress Shooter/Multiplayer First-Person Shooter

WHAT'S PROMISING: Unlike *Episode One*—perfectly paced though ultimately linear, satisfying though an insatiable cannibal of *Half-Life 2*'s settings—this second episode frees players from path following...and itself of old trappings. Now outside Eastern European–ish City 17, Gordon Freeman wends his way through an Antlion larder and the White Forest. "Some maps are massively nonlinear," says engineer Josh Weier, and the episode's woodlands provide ultimate objectives (say rendezvous with resistance scientists in a silo somewhere) while leaving proximate tactics up to players. The idea is more choice, moment to moment: Instead of predicting when the Combine will appear, we suss out where they're concentrated and plan one of several possible approaches. A buggy/dozer hybrid adds frontal assaults and fast getaways to the agenda.

Team Fortress 2, part of the *Episode Two*/*Portal* package, stuns on sight. Shadows and stark shapes—more so than fine detail—define character classes that move as though hand-animated, grip hiccuping guns, airwalk at the apex of rocket hops, bang turrets into place, and more. Painterly environments complete the campy sci-fi/spy-themed picture: Farm and industrial facades on each team's fortress give way to high-tech underground facilities.

TF2 builds on *Team Fortress Classic*'s nine trademark classes, notably tweaking Medic, Spy, and Demo Man kits to reflect today's physics technology and address cocreator Robin Walker's dissatisfaction with dated mechanics such as the Medic's inability to easily assist allies and ability to infect foes. ("'Stay away from teammates; they might hurt you,' isn't exactly a good signal to send," Walker says.) No word yet on which modes, other than capture the flag, are coming back, although Walker hints at new uses for the Demo Man's environment-obliterating detpacks, as well as the Engineer's construction kit. Expect a comprehensive commentary mode to explain the whys and hows.

POTENTIAL PRATFALLS: Valve invented FPS as series of carefully controlled encounters, but can it dial down scripting and still deliver? (We'd wonder about Vortigaunt allies who now fight alongside Freeman and amp his HEV suit if *Episode One* hadn't already proven Valve's handle on partner A.I.)

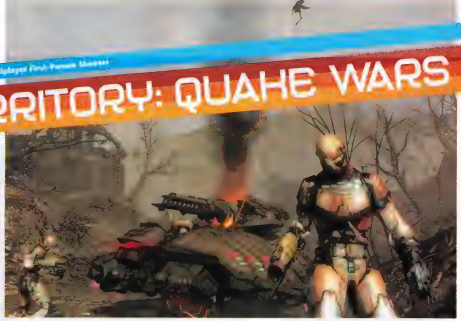
Team Fortress 2 isn't especially worrying, either. Curb *Team Fortress Classic*'s overabundant explosives and tendency to stalemate, tweak underdeveloped classes (Valve's already announced it's rejiggering the Pyro and Demo Man), and the game's good to go. Of course, hardcore fans have their own ideas, and even the slightest change to the *TFC* template will provoke vocal online opposition.

WHAT WE DIDN'T KNOW: "*Episode Two*'s vehicles include an old refrigerator, retrofitted to serve as a cargo container. Plus, remakes of *Team Fortress Classic* maps Well and Dustbowl are in the works for *TF2*." –*Doug Lombardi, marketing director, Valve* ● **Shawn Elliott**

Also in the package: first-person puzzler *Portal*

PUBLISHER: **Activision** DEVELOPER: **Splash Damage/id** GENRE: **Multiplayer First-Person Shooter**

ENEMY TERRITORY: QUAKE WARS



WHAT'S PROMISING: A top five within a top 10, if you will: **1)** *ETQW* hails from the same Bromley, England blokes who brought us the fire-hot and for-free *Return to Castle Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory*. **2)** Borg-like Strogg battle flesh-and-blood humans; because extraterrestrials and earthlings aren't equally equipped, 32-man matches differ depending upon the faction you join. **3)** Megatexture tech created by id cofounder John Carmack lets artists "add 10 million tiny little touches to levels." **4)** Micromissions make lone-wolf play tactical: Servers identify targets of opportunity from radar arrays to field guns, as well as the nearest soldier with the means to smash them, whereas HUD pop-ups alert medics when allies fall. Naturally, pursuing objectives nets more points. **5)** Maps serve as story beats, adding motive to the mayhem, by chronicling the *Quake* series' offscreen battles. One, for instance, involves an effort to hinder the development of the hyperblaster, while another explores how humans reverse-engineered Strogg slipgates to strike at Stroggos in *Quake II*.

POTENTIAL PRATFALLS: As of QuakeCon '06, it still seemed difficult to determine which direction incoming fire was coming from, as well as precisely who or what, in a world of 1,000 possible deaths, did us in—dangerous frustrations for a shooter of *ETQW*'s sort. Id co-owner Kevin Cloud assures us that such snafus are indicative of *ETQW*'s work-in-progress status, plain and simple, and that the developer's "done when it's done" MO affords time to nip, tuck, tune, and balance as needed, although beating the potentially sexier-looking and conceptually similar *Crysis* to market could become crucial.

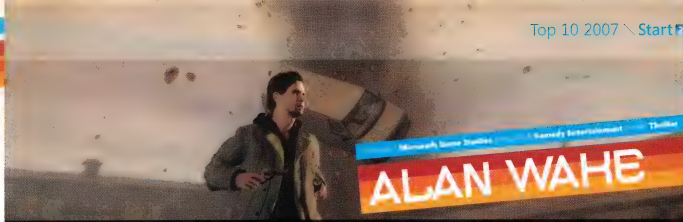
WHAT WE DIDN'T KNOW: "Id's brought back veteran game, TV, and film composer Bill Brown for *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*' music needs. Bill goes back with the guys to *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory*, and even *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*. Plus he did the *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* trailers, too." *–Kevin Cloud, creative director and co-owner, id Software* ● **SE**

HELLGATE: LONDON

WHAT'S PROMISING: It's the spiritual successor to *Diablo*...and, with former Blizzard superstar Bill Roper at the helm of *Hellgate* developer Flagship Studios, that's no surprise. The game features an intricate loot system, randomized levels (all set against a hellish modern-day England backdrop), engrossing multiplayer functionality, and three unique character factions: the sword-wielding, hack-happy Templar; the spooky, demon-summoning Cabalist; and—this just in—the Hunter, who fills the ranged combat slot for FPS-crazed players.

POTENTIAL PRATFALLS: Hook up with your buddies in a centralized online lobby and sally forth in search of adventure: It's a tried-and-true format that *Diablo* vets were psyched about when *Hellgate* was first announced. Since then, competing action-MMORPG *Guild Wars* stole a bit of *Hellgate*'s thunder, making this sort of multiplayer dynamic yesterday's news. But more than this, we're concerned with waiting forever to play the game, given Flagship's persistent "when it's done" attitude.

WHAT WE DIDN'T KNOW: "Our multiplayer plans are really falling into place, with an emphasis on all the reasons you'll want to go online—from the specialized community elements, to [our support of] a worldwide economy, to specific game modes. We're playing with each other in the office all the time now, and it's been great to start the initial balance, gameplay tweaking, and making the different character classes play well with each other. We've got some big surprises in store that are going to make our MMO experience very different from any other RPG you've tried." *–Bill Roper, CEO/cofounder, Flagship Studios* ● **Ryan Scott**



ALAN WAHE

WHAT'S PROMISING: This atmospheric thriller is being made by folks who know how to make a thriller—Finnish developer Remedy Entertainment, the company behind *Max Payne 1* and *2*. And while the *Payne* games drew inspiration from film noir, *Alan Wake* takes its cue from modern-day horror classics like *Twin Peaks* and *The Shining*. Remedy is promising a *GTA*-styled open world, but one that will get increasingly surreal as the game progresses, pulling the rug out from under the player. The game's graphics are incredible—truly next-gen lighting and shadow effects that will play a key role in gameplay as well.

POTENTIAL PRATFALLS: It's been a while since *Max Payne 2*, and not everyone was too fond of that game, so Remedy needs to prove it has still got it. And open-world designs are tough to pull off. Only the *GTA* games have ever truly nailed it.

WHAT WE DIDN'T KNOW: As we went to press, we learned that *Alan Wake*'s release date is still to be determined. So while we're hoping for 2007, there's no promise yet. But maybe making our list here will inspire them to work harder. ● **Jeff Green**

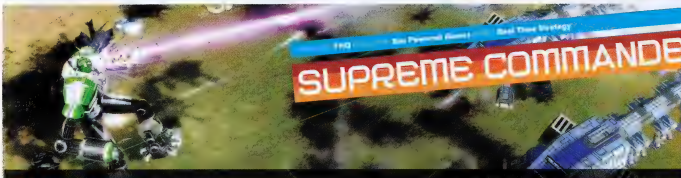
PIRATES OF THE BURNING SEA

WHAT'S PROMISING: A complex player-driven economy; character customization on the level of *City of Heroes* ("That's what we're shooting for," says producer John Tynes); noninstanced PVE and PVP adventure sites that pack dozens of players in for ship-to-ship combat and sword fights. Think massively multiplayer *Monkey Island*.

POTENTIAL PRATFALLS: We live in a *World of WarCraft* world, with rough waters ahead for comparatively small-fry MMOs like *Pirates*. If its unique features hold up, we're hoping it can eke out a modest-but-successful *Eve Online*–caliber existence, as success on *WOW* or *Final Fantasy XI*'s level is a serious long shot.

WHAT WE DIDN'T KNOW: "We're working on an epic storyline that involves the supernatural—the kinds of myths and legends that sailors of 1720 believed in. You can play through this experience and learn all kinds of secrets, including why it's called the 'Burning Sea.'" *–John Tynes, producer, Flying Lab Software* ● **RS**

SUPREME COMMANDER



WHAT'S PROMISING: *Total Annihilation* loyalists, stop with the clamoring—your sequel arrives next year. *Supreme Commander* dishes up more of lead designer Chris Taylor's unique vision of real-time strategy, this time with mammoth, multiscreen units and structures.

POTENTIAL PRATFALLS: Taylor's made some pretty bold promises about *SupCom*'s reliance on strategy as opposed to tactics (that is, "big-picture planning" versus "circumstantial course of action"). Our worry plays more on the target audience than the game itself: Just how many people are gonna notice the difference?

WHAT WE DIDN'T KNOW: "We have these personality 'archetypes,' each with very different play styles like 'rush' and 'turtle.' We're also working on a method to blend various archetypes, and what we have almost completed is what we call the 'balanced' archetype. This opponent will both 'tech up' and send out the occasional invasion force, which keeps you off balance a lot more." *–Chris Taylor, CEO/creative director, Gas Powered Games* ● **RS**

XTRAS

GAME VIDEOS

Once you're done reading about 'em, see video footage of our Top 10 2007 games in action at GFW01.1UP.com.

1UP NETWORK

EA Games | EA LA | Real-Time Strategy

COMMAND & CONQUER 3: TIBERIUM WARS

WHAT'S PROMISING: Well, it's a new *Command & Conquer* game, for one thing. So that's (usually) something to be (moderately) happy about. But this one genuinely brings out the rabid fanboys in us. Why? Because it finally marks the return to the series' original sci-fi setting—the epic battle between the Brotherhood of NOD and the Global Defense Initiative—for the first time since 1999's *Command & Conquer: Tiberian Sun* (and the 2000 *Firestorm* expansion pack). The new game's graphics, using the engine from EA's stellar *Battle for Middle-earth II*, look good so far, and the team has promised to both modernize and fix the core gameplay (yay pathfinding!) while preserving the spirit of the old games.

POTENTIAL PRATFALLS: The C&C series has been out of the spotlight, and out of development, for many years now, and with games like *Company of Heroes* and the upcoming *Supreme Commander* now in the spotlight, *C&C 3* is really going to have to pull out the stops to compete. And are those full-motion video cut-scenes going to be cheesy good, or just cheesy?

WHAT WE DIDN'T KNOW: The cast for those FMV cut-scenes is turning into a geek's dream. Ultimate bad guy Kane is back and is being played by Joe Kucan, the actor who played him in the old games. But now we're also going to meet his right hand in the Brotherhood of Nod, Killian Qatar, played by none other than Tricia Helfer, the nerd It Girl who plays Number 6 on *Battlestar Galactica*. And she's not the only Cylon babe in the cast: Grace Park (Sharon Valerii) plays a character on the GDI side. And to round out the geekathon, Josh Holloway (Sawyer from *Lost*), and Billy Dee Williams (Hi, Lando, duh!) slum it, too. Do all these actors have overdue house payments, or what? ● **JG**

EA Games | Crytek | First-Person Shooter

CRYSIS

WHAT'S PROMISING: *Crysis* developer Crytek wants what's onscreen to issue the opening statement. Jaws unhinged and hanging, technophiles finger the razzle-dazzle there as depth of field, dynamic deforestation, subsurface scattering, soft shadows, and such. But before we're able to wonder whether, you know, a game exists behind the graphics, we're staring at an E.T. scenario unlike any we've encountered.

Refrigerated rain forest and shock-frozen seas not only *seem* otherworldly, they offer out-of-the-ordinary interaction when hero Jake Dunn shatters matter so that the shards fly at foes; aliens do the same to create obstruction or fracture ice floes to sink annoying earthlings. Crytek, of course, boasts that flexible A.I. behavior complements the shooter's far-out playspaces while capitalizing on changing conditions—spacelike zero-gray settings included.

POTENTIAL PRATFALLS: Your skepticism meets ours on more than a few points: Will it run well on a wide range of rigs? (Some wonder whether it will run well *period*.) Can anything as technically ambitious for its time hit shelves on schedule where *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2* couldn't? And what of its grandstanding, 32-man multiplayer game in which teams appropriate dry docks, motorworks, and aviation centers to fabricate sea-, land-, and aircraft in an economy-focused campaign? Topping *Battlefield* in principle is one thing (and that with only one part of an off- *and* online package), but tuning army-vs.-army shooters is notoriously tricky.

WHAT WE DIDN'T KNOW: "We got to meet Robin Williams at the Electronic Entertainment Expo. He told us what a big *Far Cry* fan he is and then proceeded to mimic the game for us, complete with gunshots and explosions. It was especially great when he looked on as we demoed *Crysis* and mimicked the player punching out a Trooper." –*Cevat Yerli, CEO, Crytek* ● **SE**

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WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

Bringing the grind from your desktop to your tabletop

Moonshadow
Flig Moonshadow → Shuffle your hand into your deck, then draw that many cards.
27
Thrash Blade
When your hero deals combat damage with Thrash Blade for the first time on each of your turns, ready Thrash Blade and your hero.
2
Moira Darkheart
Destroy target
4

● **More DOTs! The Onyxia's Lair Raid Deck allows several heroes to fight in tandem against the infamous Ony.**

PREVIEW

Some of us spend more time in the *World of WarCraft* than in the real world. So count Upper Deck Entertainment's new *World of WarCraft Trading Card Game* as either a Paladin's blessing or a Warlock's curse—a way to pull your eyes away from the monitor for a few precious minutes, or another silly addiction to dump your time and money into.

The game's mechanics are similar to *Magic: The Gathering*—two dueling heroes take turns whittling away each other's hit points while playing allies, weapons, and special abilities against each other. Quest cards stand in place of *Magic*'s "land" (resources that accumulate over turns so you can perform more and more powerful attacks), and cards bear names familiar to any serious *WOW* player (Arcanite Reaper; Are We There, Yeti?).

Now for the pure evil part: Booster packs are sprinkled with special code-bearing Loot Cards that unlock rewards in the actual MMO—turn in your code to an in-game NPC named Landro Longshot (a member of the new Goblin Gambler faction) and you'll get one of three rewards: a Goblin Gambler tabard to wear over your gear, a baby hippogryph to add to your pet menagerie, or a turtle mount that can be used by characters of any level and even in places other mounts can't go—but adds no speed bonus whatsoever. Alternately, if luck's not on your side, three other rewards are available to anyone who accumulates enough points through booster- and starter-pack purchases—grind Upper Deck Entertainment faction, so to speak. Upper Deck is quick to point out that all of the rewards offer purely cosmetic upgrades—nothing in the TCG will modify MMO gameplay—no doubt fearing the inevitable call for a nerf from noncard gamers. ● **Sean Molloy**

BOOSTER PACKS COME WITH SPECIAL CODE-BEARING LOOT CARDS.

● **Upper Deck predicts you'll see the ultrarare turtle mount just a wee bit more often than you do Murky, the rare dancing baby Murloc given away at BlizzCon.**

● **No Azerothian pet collection is complete without a lil't baby hippogryph.**

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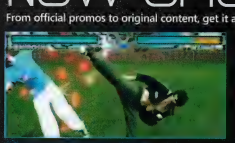

REAL-LIFE *TEKKEN* FIGHT

High-kicking high schoolers meet on the football field for pantomime kung fu and post-production "Pow!" effects.

***RESIDENT EVIL 4* SUPER FAN MOVIE**

A Brit and his cross-dressing chum stage a scene-for-scene, five-action adaptation of the console chiller.

***HALF-LIFE 2* "PHYSICS" SHOWCASE**

Devious *Half-Life 2*-based Rube Goldberg device clobbers a zombie in no less than 30 convoluted steps.

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ASSASSIN'S CREED

Console exclusive" plays peekaboo on PC

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft Montreal** GENRE: **Action** RELEASE DATE: **2007**

PREVIEW

An apolitical Crusade story isn't possible; still, Ubisoft insists actioner *Assassin's Creed* spins one. Set in 1191 at the tail of the third Christian-Muslim clash in Richard the Lionheart–controlled Acre, Saladin's Damascus and Jerusalem, and the cliffside fortress city of Arsuf, it follows an Islamic society infamous for its policy of secret murder.

And what of perception problems? (Picture the spin: "Videogamers slay Christians!") "It's important to note that, historically, the Assassins had their own philosophy," says producer Jade Raymond, "quite different from that of the Crusaders or the Saracens." Creative license clears the rest. "Since they were a sort of mystic, mythical bunch, almost nothing about their actions or cause can be confirmed. Historic ambiguity allows us to portray them as forward-thinkers trying to stop the war," Raymond says. "Neither Crusaders nor Saracens are the Assassins' true enemy. War is—as are those who exploit it."

Silent since *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, Ubisoft Montreal's studio members stayed keen on places east of the Mediterranean. "It's not enough for us to simply set *AC* here," Raymond says. "We're compelled to capture the experience of life in this tumultuous time, the fusion of European and Middle Eastern art and architecture, the intrigue, the political machinations, and the air of mystery that surrounds the era's secret societies. And, well," she adds, "we want to provide gamers with an unprecedented sense of immersion, and what better setting for interesting crowd gameplay than medieval streets packed with merchants, Templars, and public executions?"

Protagonist Altair works under the sun in plain sight. Dressing the part of some 12th-century superhero (presumably to pop onscreen, as opposed to making sense in the context), the Assassin operates amid bustling market stalls, mosques, and meeting places. Priests, beggars, and prostitutes mill about in mobs of 60 or more, and Altair must compete or cooperate with them in *AC*'s crowded sets. "We want to achieve a degree of social realism in Altair's interactions," Raymond says. "Elsewhere, say in *Grand Theft Auto*, it's not unusual to run everywhere while holding a gun and have no one take notice. In fact, the very idea of running all the time is videogamey. Thus, Altair has two modes of movement: a 'low-profile' version, where all of his actions are modified for maximum social acceptability, and a second, 'high-profile' variant, where he acts the hero, but simultaneously becomes more conspicuous, possibly putting his mission at risk." In other words, it's possible to shove one's way past impediments (push an actual button to push someone's buttons, so to speak) or to see them as people. According to temperament and stature, NPCs might turn the other cheek or retaliate, passively/aggressively sneer or attempt to extract>

"WE'RE COMPELLED TO CAPTURE THE EXPERIENCE OF LIFE IN THIS TUMULTUOUS TIME." –JADE RAYMOND, PRODUCER

an eye or a tooth for an ego. At times, it's smart to happy-slap your way through the throng without worrying about the hubbub forming in your wake. At others, civility is the wiser way.

Says Raymond: "As the player/Altair progresses, he has the option of assisting certain categories of people. These missions are optional, but always impact the player's social standing. NPCs turn from hindering the Assassin to helping him." For instance, sympathetic priests admit you into their white-robed ranks to stymie pursuers. A free-loader extends a foot to trip those on your tail, or points a patrol here when, in actuality, you're hiding there. Other abettors might throw stones at town officials or amass in alleys, blocking passage once you've passed. These are Altair's "superpowers," standing in where the Prince of Persia slowed, reversed, and stopped time.

Other postassassination options include violence and evasion, fight or flight. If surrounded, Altair shifts from stealth (as well as a compact crossbow and the retractable talon attached to his arm) to swordplay. Says Raymond: "Realism is the driving factor for our fighting system. We didn't want our characters to survive head wounds or to shrug off sword strikes as though nothing happened. Instead, players need to find and create openings in their opponents' defense while covering openings of their own. Observation and proper timing matter; not memorizing preset combo strings."

When odds are overwhelming—"there's no taking on 50 foes at a time," warns Raymond—Altair scrams, either with the assistance of NPCs, or, when previous bad behavior precludes it, via rooftop. See the game's destinations as a grid. Eschewing *Prince of Persia*'s dot connecting, where platforming is all linear progress, athletics in *AC* resemble "free-running" in that every ledge and brick is a handhold, and every banister a landing zone. Plus, independent hotkeys for arm and leg movement permit improvisational control—vault this, hurdle that, go here, go there.

And what of the cryptic messages from the 21st century that pop up when Altair flubs his mission? "For the moment, all I can say is that, as you assassinate those responsible for the Third Crusade, you also uncover a plot with farther-reaching implications," Raymond reveals, "a conspiracy that touches on subjects relevant to you and me." ● **Shawn Elliott**

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• Ensemble's next RTS? The Xbox 360-exclusive *Halo Wars*. Bob the developer says they're not giving up on the PC.

• **We had a few big problems with *Age of Empires III* when it first came out (see *CGW* #257), but patches and expansions can work wonders. Turn to page 93, and you'll see that we've since changed our tune.**

ENSEMBLE STUDIOS' BRUCE SHELLEY SPEAKS

Just not about *Halo Wars* (yet)

INTERVIEW

It may be a bit too drama-queeny of us to call it an "end of the world" moment, but when we heard that *Halo Wars*, a real-time strategy game for the Xbox 360, was being developed by PC-gaming diehards Ensemble Studios, well—it made us nervous. We contacted Ensemble's lead game designer Bruce Shelley to see if he'd reassure us that this was all just a bad dream and that we'd get to play on the PC too—but he's too smart to spill any real secrets. He was, however, more than willing to talk with us about Ensemble's current and future plans for its flagship *Age of Empires* franchise—and to reassure us that Ensemble has not broken up with us.

• **Jeff Green**

GFW: OK, so you're making *Halo Wars* for the Xbox 360. Does this mean you're done with *Age of Empires III* for a while? Or will we see more? Another expansion? More maps?

Bruce Shelley: There will be more. All of our games have enjoyed long shelf lives and providing more [content] seems to help with that. We want to keep *Age of Empires* going for some time to come. We have an ES Live team that works entirely on improving the game and delivering new content and features.

GFW: One of the big challenges with the original *AOE3* for you was to retain historical accuracy and respect, especially with regard to Native Americans. With the new *WarChiefs* expansion, it seems you felt free to indulge in a little more of the fantastic and less realistic. Why and how were you able to make this come about?

BS: We were very aware of the geopolitical concerns that faced *AOE3* and took a lot of care to involve Native Americans within Microsoft along with academics as we decided how the game would work and look. I don't recall any negative comments about our approach after [*AOE3*'s] release, but a lot of people did express regret that they couldn't play as Native Americans. Once we embraced the idea of playing as them, lead designer Sandy Petersen and the rest of the design team decided to add some touches of the Native American mythology. This took us a little into the fantastic and magical, but we hope this helps reinforce the feeling that you are playing something different. There were moments when Native Americans really believed they were impervious to bullets.

GFW: Our original review of *AOE3* was a bit harsh [3/5 stars, *CGW* #257]. In retrospect, do you feel our review was unfair? Or do some of the criticisms seem valid?

BS: Rather than harsh or unfair, I would use the word "shallow." Our games are broad and deep with tons of content, and they are a challenge for a reviewer on a tight schedule. After further experience, I believe your reviewer has improved his opinion of *Age III* substantially and that is good to hear. Most, if not all, of the criticism was certainly valid; but a reviewer can only see so much of a big game and we think some strong points were not given their due. We'd almost rather see a more carefully considered review appear later, but we understand time constraints.

GFW: If you could go back in time and rerelease *AOE3* all over again, what's the one big design decision you would change?

BS: We had an ambitious plan for making military formations significant: Facing would matter, different formations would be more effective in certain situations, battle would not be a swirling free-for-all. It really made the game look and play differently, and was close to working, but there were so many special cases that fixing it right was impossible in the time we had. I would like to have seen working formations in *Age of Empires III*.

GFW: So back to *Halo Wars*. We know you can't talk about it. But just tell us this: How much should PC gamers worry, really? Have you "given up" on the PC, as the message-board Chicken Littles have been crying?

BS: Ensemble Studios is not giving up on the PC, believe me. We are taking a break from *Age of Empires*, but not forever. Some of us have been working on it for 11 years. In the meantime, we have a really different PC game in the works that we hope to begin talking about next year, if it comes together successfully. •

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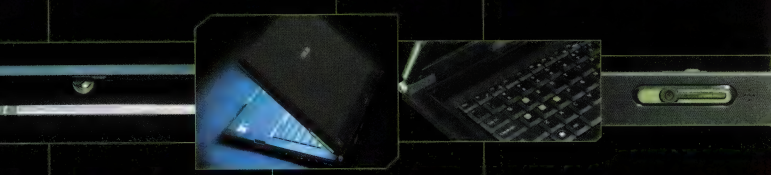

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NVIDIA

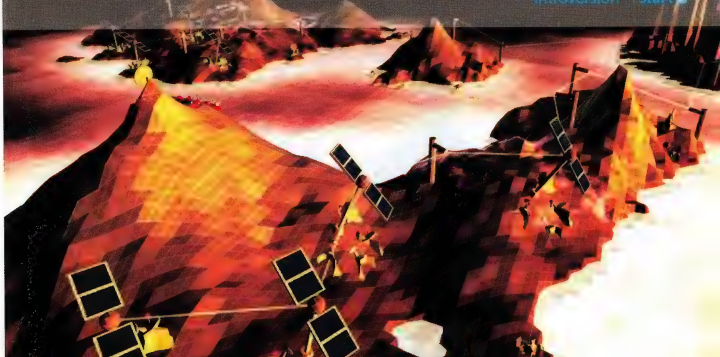
LAST OF THE PAJAMA PROGRAMMERS

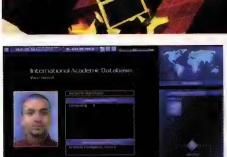
U.K.-based Introversion deconstructs the games industry, one polygon at a time

TRENDS

You'd think a hard-slaving guy who just spent the better part of a weekend sweating the release of his company's brand-new game might come across as a bit more bone-weary. But no, Introversion's self-described creative/commercial mediator Mark Morris sounds positively jazzed, like he's the proudest parent in the world. On September 29, the London-based games company with which Morris serves as codirector unleashed its third title, *DEFCON*, a *Dr. Strangelove*–ian real-time strategy mash-up in which six players sneak units around a vector graphics map of the world and, when the clock runs down, lob megaton nukes at each other. Of course, no sooner had Introversion pulled the trigger on the downloadable version than—in classic Murphy's fashion—its pipe to the Internet went kaput.

"We launched and almost immediately the service fell apart," says Morris wryly. "Someone accidentally knocked a fiber cable in our ISP's data center, so it's this classic case of it doesn't





● ***Uplink*, Introversion's premier project**

● ***Darwinia*'s postmillennial minimalism**

● **Introversion: floored on the floor**

matter how much you shore up your systems, you just can't predict the bloke hoovering around the server." And though the team labored for several hours to bring the service back online as anxious fans endured page time-outs, the ISP collapse was only part of the problem. "*DEFCON* was our first online game," says Morris. "And although we'd done an awful lot of stress testing to ensure we could cope with the load, I don't think we ever anticipated the demand we ended up with."

Demand of a magnitude that translated to over 2,000 simultaneous games hammering Introversion's metaserver the first night alone. That's quite a different tune from the one the company was singing in 2001, when it was puzzling out how to sell its very first product: a hacking simulation called *Uplink* which—absent so much as a marketing penny—sold purely by word of mouth. In fact, the team that would go on to win the Independent Games Festival Grand Prize in March 2006 for its second game (the esoteric real-time whatchamacallit *Darwinia*) started out as a few Imperial College computer science pals having a go at a business contest. "We all went to the same halls of residence back in 1997, so that's when I first met Johnny [Knottenbelt] and Chris [Delay], who were fellow computer scientists," says Morris. "And basically we just did what you do at college, which is, you know, program, go out, get drunk."

"And then, I can't remember exactly when, it might have been the second year or possibly the third, Chris said to me, 'I'm going to make a game about computer hacking' and he'd mentioned that he wanted to have a go at the games industry,' explains Morris, who still has a bet with Delay for 1,000 pounds that he *won't* work in the games industry. "I was absolutely convinced that he'd be seduced and sign with the banks or something for more money." Programming in his spare time, Delay began assembling the elements of what would eventually become *Uplink*. Around that time, Imperial College was running a competition in which whoever submitted the best plan for a new business would win 10,000 pounds. "We decided we were going to write our plan for a games company based around Chris's *Uplink*," says Morris. "Because to us it would have been something we could use to pay off our student loans before we went our separate ways." As they worked, Morris says it quickly became apparent they were going to lose because the judges were (somewhat ironically) looking for more "novel" business ideas than a games company. "But afterward we still had this business plan, and we thought, well hey, let's all put 200 pounds in and see where it takes us." So Morris and pals cooked up a website, added an online credit card processor, posted on a few hacker forums, "And all of a sudden, it just took off," says Morris. "We were selling something like four copies on the first day, then eight on the second, then 40 on the third, 150 on the next day, and so on. And it was at that point that Introversion was born."

DISTRIBUTION GAME

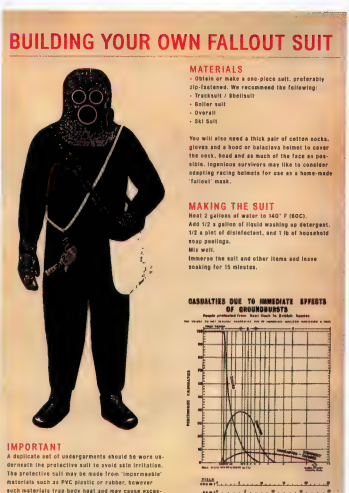
Rags to riches? Not quite. Despite selling numerous copies of *Uplink* and enjoying a lot of positive press, in the years that followed, Introversion gradually slid into the red, to the point where Morris and friends weren't taking salaries. "We didn't really know how to manage the finances properly at first," says Morris, noting that while the money was coming in, they weren't tracking spending (a duty cofounder Thomas Arundel now oversees religiously). "And we also sort of thought the *Uplink* bubble would never end," adds Morris. "You know, that *Uplink* would just continue selling and everything would be rosy." This was the long and arduous phase the company's website labels "the difficult second album years," the period between 2002 and 2004 during which Delay and team were struggling to turn a clever idea—sprites grafted on polygons to efficiently spawn enormous armies—into a game. Introversion finally launched >

that game (*Darwinia*) in March 2005 to immediate critical acclaim, and by the end of the year the company was racing forward again, signing a milestone deal with Valve to distribute *Darwinia* via Steam.

"Steam really sort of saved Introversion, I think, with the number of copies they were able to shift," admits Morris. "They have 6 million users, so suddenly you have that kind of base out there that Steam just switches on." But while Steam brought Introversion to the masses, it's the company's original, retro-style games that have attracted an almost cultish following, a component Morris attributes to the company's fierce independence. "We believe the money that goes into developing computer games is getting larger and larger, and the publishers fronting that money are seeking to minimize their risk," he explains. "Now an unforeseen consequence of this is that creativity is being driven out of the design process."

According to Morris, it starts when publishers require "design documents" before creative ideas have been fully thought through. Designers are then asked for a "vertical slice" (an interactive outline) to minimize the risk. "So you're working hard, and you've got no time to experiment with something," he says. "On top of that, at various points along the way, the publishers will want to pull the game in a particular direction based on their latest sales graph, further diluting what initially was a phenomenally creative and brand-new idea." In the end, says Morris, even if you manage to produce something novel, the marketing department might not "get it." "Because of that, they won't give it the same marketing oomph they would have were it another EA Sports clone," he says. "So games that are more creative tend to slip through unnoticed. And then publishers conclude, well, you know, sales weren't as good, just as we suspected; let's go back to making alphabet soup."

Would Introversion consider trading its indie status for a sweet deal? "The views within the company vary," says Morris. "There are two extremes.... The first is that there's absolutely no way we would sell out, ever, under any circumstances. The other is that, for the right amount of cash, it would be lunacy to do anything else." Still, Morris says Introversion is worth a lot to everyone because it's a lifestyle. "We all grew up in the days when computers were still really cool, and you'd see different things coming out with really unique topics from people who were able to code in their bedrooms. We see ourselves carrying the banner of coding from back in those old days." So far, it's a banner critics and fans are more than willing to flock to. ● **Matt Peckham**


BUILDING YOUR OWN FALLOUT SUIT
MATERIALS
- Obtain or make a one piece suit, preferably zip-fastened. We recommend the following:
- Tracksuit / Shellsuit
- Roller suit
- Overall
- Ski Suit
You will also need a thick pair of cotton socks, gloves and a hood or balaclava helmet to cover the neck, head and as much of the face as possible. Ingenious survivors may like to consider adapting racing helmets for use as a home-made 'fallout' mask.
MAKING THE SUIT
Heat 2 gallons of water to 140° F (60C).
Add 1/2 a gallon of liquid washing up detergent, 1/2 a pint of disinfectant, and 1 lb of household soup peelings.
Mix well.
Immerse the suit and other items and leave soaking for 15 minutes.
IMPORTANT
A duplicate set of undergarments should be worn underneath the protective suit to avoid skin irritation. The protective suit may be made from 'impermeable' materials such as PVC plastic or rubber, however such materials trap body heat and may cause excessive sweating and heat exhaustion.
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● **Defiant: *DEFCON* promotional material**

LEADERS OF THE BAND

GFW: How do you guys pin up your project ideas? Is it collaborative?

Mark Morris: It's very much a one-man band, actually. The game ideas come from Chris [Delay] and Chris takes those ideas, does experimental concepts bouncing around on the inside of his brain to something tangible. So what tends to happen is, around two-thirds of the way through a project, Chris starts thinking about what the next game's going to look like. And now a few beers he'll say, "I've just had this idea, this is what I'm thinking, this is how I'm quite feeling at the moment." And then we give him our views on which of those ideas are good and maybe some things he hasn't considered. So it's actually very, I'd emphasized, which is, I believe, necessary for us to be able to produce creative games. But I can tell you it's a real pain to manage.

GFW: How is the team structured?

MM: When it was just the three of us, Chris was the creative guy and Tom [Arundel] was the very sort of hard-nosed businessman. And their two views needed constant reconciliation because they tend not to see eye-to-eye on much, which actually lends us an awful lot of strength. But my role is to tread the middle line between the two of them and be a sort of trusted ear. They both know that I'll make the decision that's in the best interest of the company.

GFW: You're very candid about the whole business setup.

MM: I think the people that play our games have the right to know how we go about doing these things. They have a right to an insight into the way companies operate, how you're inspired and such. So I feel sort of obligated to let everyone out there know how we do what we do.

GFW: Right after *DEFCON*'s launch, your news page read, "Much was discussed, wine was consumed, and the entire company was restructured." Mind divulging more details?

MM: That quote was really about the finances of the company, and the manner in which the shares were divided up, salaries and things. We didn't start on equal footing, and for a long period there was inequality within the company, and that didn't serve anybody well. So what we were able to do, and I feel really quite proud of this, is despite any baggage we might have brought to that meeting, we were able to sort of get drunk and resolve it, which was a real coup, so I think we're the strongest we've ever been right now.

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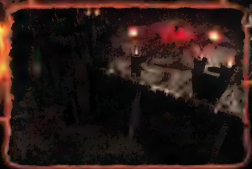

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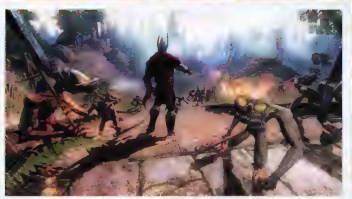
OVERLORD

Unleash your id (and underlings)



Codemasters Triumph Studios Action RELEASE DATE Summer 2007

PREVIEW

Take a scruples test sometime and you just might find that menacing despots aren't actually evil—just misunderstood. Exhibit A: the titular overlord from Codemasters' twisted action game. Who is he? At the game's start, he's a blank slate—neither good nor evil—just a mysterious figure squatting in a dark tower owned by the previous evil overlord. Just how sinister things get is entirely up to you.

"Antihero protagonists always run the risk of alienating the audience," says Triumph Studios director Lennart Sas. "Not many people can identify with Xemublebub, the five-legged netherworld demon that eats roasted babies for breakfast. *Overlord* gradually eases the player into their role."

However, a dark lord is nothing without his toadies, obedient minions who do your bidding—and set *Overlord* apart from other action games. Order them to loot the local village, and they'll arm themselves with whatever they find in the environment before bringing back your tribute. Have them slay the locals, and your horde will return with the townsfolk's life force, which you can use to build your army. Sas expects your posse to run as large as 60-strong, with each impish underling delivering dark slapstick comedy with every attack.

If you want to clear a town square, just send in some TNT-toting peons, stand clear, and watch the mayhem. The first time you order your troops to molest the local sheep, well, let's just say a screenshot's worth at least a couple of words (see below). Even beyond that, minions will harass the peasant folk, steal, belch, dress up in drag, burn down houses, and react to the world in some odd ways—stopping to listen to a fiddler, for example, before bashing him over the head.

"The humor comes from the minions doing all sorts of crazy stuff in the situations they find themselves in," says Sas. Rather than draw inspiration from classic comedic games like *Dungeon Keeper* or *The Horde*, though, *Overlord* takes a page from movies such as *Gremlins* and *Labyrinth*.

The enemies also share the same twisted humor as your underlings. Sas points out some of his favorite examples: "An enormously fat halfling squashes your minions. Then there's a perverted paladin with his harem of succubi, and bloodstained rampaging unicorns." Sas likes nothing better than seeing minions getting skewered on the end of a unicorn's horn or walking off with a beautiful (and inevitably murderous) succubus.

Just because the overlord starts with a blank slate, it doesn't mean your conscience will stay squeaky clean. The game remembers players' evil deeds; whenever you return to your tower, a jester minion announces your presence by listing off your achievements: "Exterminator of the Elven Race, Destroyer of Lives, and Ravager of Villages." Absolute power corrupts absolutely, or so the saying goes. As you become more and more corrupt, the population will react differently to you; your tower and personal appearance will radically alter, and you'll be able to wield forbidden magic. Finishing totally uncorrupted, just for the sake of seeing a different ending, is going to be tough. As Sas warns, "Think of all the temptations you'll have to pass up! The first village will see you liberate the people from the tyranny of some particularly nasty, violent halflings. The peasants will welcome you as their new lord and protector, cheer for you, and bring goodies when you visit their domain. If you start exerting some proper feudal repression, the peasants will tremble and fall to their knees every time you pay them a visit. If you truly become a mean son of a bitch, the poor peasants will resort to binding their young virgin girls on sacrificial poles close to your access portal in order to appease you."

Overlord promises an extensive single-player campaign, but when it comes to practicing wrongdoing in multiplayer, Sas remains coy, promising only "cool and unique multiplayer modes"—including the possibility of one overlord and army versus another—"but we'll leave what they are to your imagination for now." ● **Darren Gladstone**

"THEN THERE'S THE PERVERTED PALADIN WITH HIS HAREM OF SUCCUBI."

–LENNART SAS, DIRECTOR

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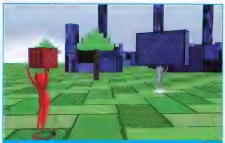
File-Front

The great philosopher Lennon once said, "The best things in life are free." Dude, that man was wise beyond his years. Those are words to live by—and yet, every day, everywhere I look, I see suckers wasting money. You still *buying* your lunch? Why, I've made sandwiches entirely from the dill pickles, jalapeños, and BBQ sauce packets I nab from the Quiznos condiment bar. Want to live rent-free? Just make sure you always get home after your roommate is asleep and leave before he gets up—and if he catches you and demands you "share the living expenses," just couch surf. And games? Well, let me put it this way: You don't need to spend money on the megagames with the million-dollar marketing budgets to have a good time. All it takes is a little patience and a little creative Web surfing to find some free time killers online. I should know—that's how I spend most of my day.

Tell you what: You keep checking back here each month, and I'll keep you on the inside track to 100-percent-free games. Deal? ● **The Freeloader**

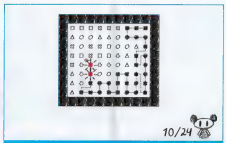
THE GAME: **Invalid Tangram**
FILE UNDER: **Color me rad!**

All right, so it may look like I just blew the dust out of an old Nintendo Entertainment System game, but I swear that *Invalid Tangram* is awesome. It's a little *Galaga*, a little *Tetris*, but mostly an 8-bit orgy of good ol'-fashioned shoot-em-up-ness. The concept's simple, really. Shoot the colored enemies, and when their blocky corpses fall into groups, absorb their powers. Trippy, blippy music is an added bonus. Hand me some glowsticks, throw me in a dark room, and I'm ready to party!



THE GAME: **Toblo**
FILE UNDER: **First-Person Geometry**

Capture the flag...with no bloodshed? C'mon, *Toblo* is too cutesy to be fun, right? Don't knock it till you've tried it. Two teams—the Cloud Kids and the Fire Fiends—are trying to nab each other's flags. But instead of crawling through corridors, you're tearing the place apart. Every geometric shape in the world—walls and trees included—is potential ammunition to clobber your enemy or a prospective blockade to protect your turf. Our quick test run turned into a two-hour play session. Nuff said.

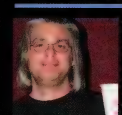


THE GAME: **Tripline**
FILE UNDER: **In-class doodler**

I doodle. A lot. It's a habit I picked up in kindergarten and honed to a razor's edge over the next 10 years or so. Now, I'm a black belt in illustration...at least, I thought I was until I tried *Tripline* on for size. It's a simple game laid out on graph paper. The goal: Draw a line connecting identical objects. That's it. The game starts easy enough, but before long, you'll be balling up paper trying to come up with the best ways to win each level. Hey, you got an extra sheet of graph paper I can borrow?

DEVELOPER'S DESKTOP

What games do they want to play again?



Some know him as the Statesman, the great protector of *City of Heroes'* Paragon City. Everyone else just calls him Jack Emmert, creative director of Cryptic Studios. And the only thing more shocking than discovering he's working on a Marvel Comics–based MMO is finding out that he wants to play *E.T.* again. What else is on his play list?

ADVENTURE

"I'll never forget the first time I unlocked the secret message in this Atari 2600 classic. I don't recall any Easter eggs in a game before that point; for some reason, I played that game over and over just to get to that end point. Heck, winning the game was secondary to getting that darn message!"

MIGHT AND MAGIC

"I originally played this on my Commodore 64. I'd love to reexperience the wonder of playing in a seemingly endless game environment."

STARCRAFT

"I lost count of how many nights I spent playing *StarCraft* with my friends. But now that I'm married and have a small child, the Protoss, Terrans, and Zerg have to get along without me."

E.T.: THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL

"I'd love to play this Atari 2600 game again if only to experience, once more, the game that ended a company. To be honest, I played it as a kid and it wasn't that bad...or maybe my memory *is* that bad."

CIVILIZATION

"I spent many sleepless nights building civilizations, conquering, building Wonders of the World. I was in grad school at the time; I'll never forget how much fun it was to put away the schoolwork and dive back in." ●

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One (1) Lockstead-Miller Newtonian Fusion Drive.

Defenses:
Duranthium II armor plating.
Two (2) Omega Deflector II Generators.

NAME:	TAS Hartinger	ACCELERATION:	2.1g	RACE:	Terran Alliance
CLASS:	"Hyperion" Class Attack Cruiser	SPEED:	2.0 Parsecs / Week	CREW COMPLEMENT:	432
LENGTH:	225 Meters	RANGE:	3-2 Sectors	DESIGNER:	YOU!
SPAN:	57 Meters	ATTACK RATING	4 / 1 / 0		
MASS:	2.53 Million Metric Tons	DEFENSE:	2 / 0 / 1		

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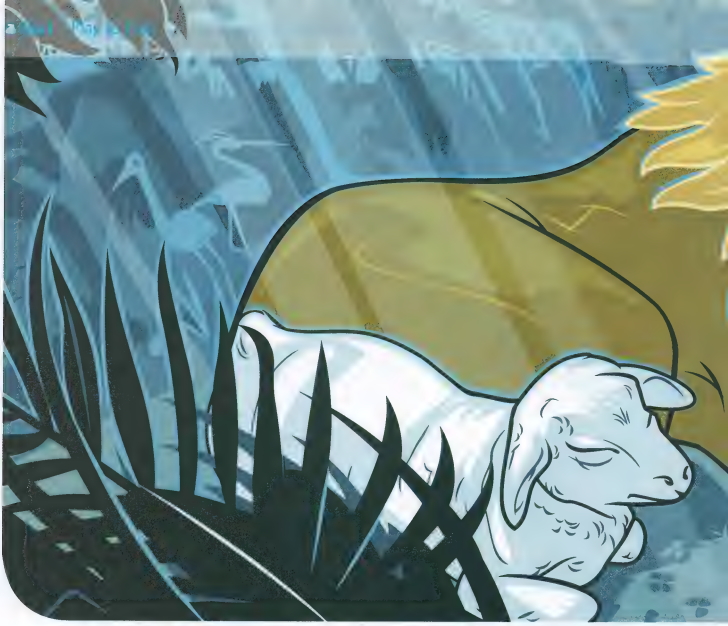


PLAY TO PRAY

A history of Christian videogames

CULTURE

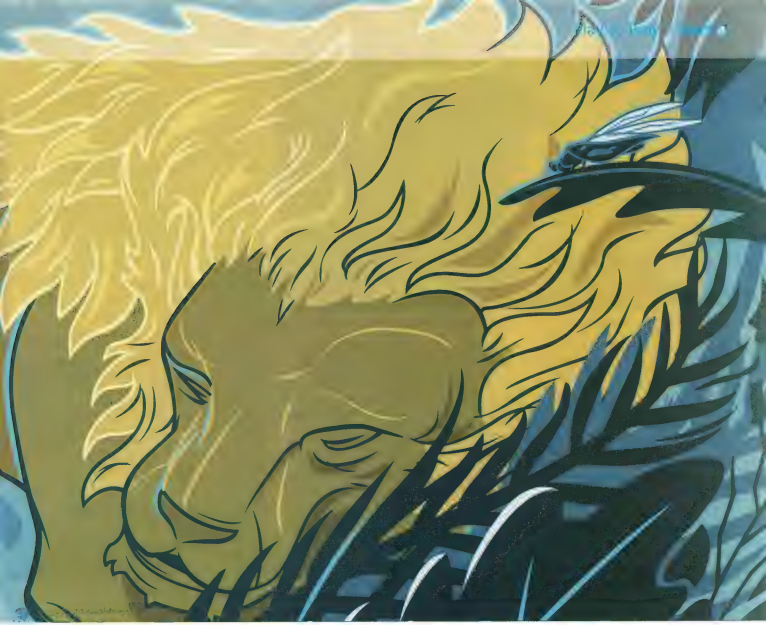
"What videogames would Jesus play?" Al Menconi, who heads a ministry in Carlsbad, California, devoted to monitoring the effects of the entertainment industry on Christian life, posed this question in early 2005 on his blog, where he offers advice to parents on how to keep the evils of the world out of the content of their children's movies, music, TV, and videogames. His online ministry, AlMenconi.com, includes an archive of more than 180 game reviews, grading each for violence, language, nudity, "occult/supernatural" elements, and "cultural/moral/ethical" content. But the question of what videogames the Savior Himself would play presented Menconi with a theological conundrum.

"I'm sure that He would never play a game that killed people or destroyed things," Menconi writes. "I'm sure that He would never play a game that displayed immoral or illegal content because the Bible tells us that He is repulsed by sin. I'm sure that He wouldn't play any game that had occult or satanic activity. He defeated Satan and his demons at the cross, so why would He want to play a defeated foe?" According to Menconi, Jesus wouldn't even want to play games like *The Sims*, "because they basically are about playing God and why would He want to 'play god' when He is God?" Which leads Menconi to suggest that maybe He wouldn't play videogames at all, or if He did, "I'm sure that He would limit His game playing time to a minimum." Christ, and by extension his followers on earth, surely have better things to do with their time, like spread the Gospel.

But some Christians believe there needn't necessarily be such a strict separation of playtime and praytime, as shown by the recent flurry of media hype around *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, the strategy game based on Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' best-selling series of novels set during the Apocalypse. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em; instead of keeping videogames out of the home, why not create "family friendly" games with pastor-approved Christian content? After all, if the U.S. Army is using videogames to recruit, can't God's Army do the same?

In fact, *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* is only the most mainstream manifestation in the long evolution of indie Christian game design, a semi-underground movement that reaches back over a decade and a half. Long before "serious games" had become a buzzword for the use of videogames in education, Christian game designers—largely of the American, born-again Protestant stripe—were already exploring ways to encode Bible lessons into side-scrollers and dungeon-hunts, removing the "bad stuff" and replacing it with religiously correct characters and themes. If the average gamer may not be familiar with the scores of original Christian titles that have appeared over the years for PCs and console

NOONAN'S WRATH AS MOSES, 1711



systems, that's because, before *Left Behind*, the vast majority of them haven't been sold through regular game stores or even through the big boxes. Instead, like much other Christian contemporary music, teen fashion, and movies, Christian videogames have long been sold only through Christian stores, specialty catalogs, and online. Christian games arose out of a love of gaming but a dissatisfaction with its nonfaith-based content. Like other products, Christian games continue one contingent of American religion's desire to remake pop culture in its own image, to create an alternative media universe parallel to the mainstream of secular society.

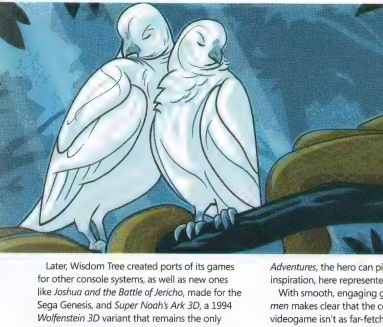
THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

The dawn of Christian gaming begins in the early '90s with a company called Wisdom Tree, a subsidiary of the somewhat notorious company Color Dreams, the best-known indie game publisher of the console era. Founded in 1989, Color Dreams produced unlicensed games for the Nintendo Entertainment System. Featuring low production values and poor coding, they bore titles like *Captain Comic*, *Robodemons*, and even *Operation Secret Storm*, an Iraq-set Gulf War tie-in featuring a cartoonish Saddam as the bad guy. Color Dreams' business model was made possible by its discovery of a means to work around Nintendo's "lockout chip" to produce cartridges that would work with the popular system. Since the games themselves were completely designed in-house, and thus didn't overstep copyright laws, Color Dreams wasn't technically doing anything illegal. But Nintendo did make it difficult for the company to sell its wares in most stores, reportedly by threatening retailers that they wouldn't distribute official NES games to any store that offered unlicensed titles.

But Nintendo's hold on the mass market didn't matter for the Wisdom Tree division, which sold its games almost wholly through the Christian bookstore circuit. Since these retailers hadn't featured videogames before, they had no problem with carrying Wisdom Tree titles, and for many years the company had an exclusive lock on the growing Christian market. "It was a concept that had never been explored in videogames before," former Wisdom Tree programmer Roger Deforest told retro game site Planet Nintendo in 2004. "I remember when the owner presented us with the idea of making religious games. He was so excited with his idea. And he convinced us it'd be *big*."

Wisdom Tree did indeed prove to be a big moneymaker for Color Dreams, providing it with some of its best-selling titles. The first Wisdom Tree game, *Bible Adventures*, was released in 1990, selling around 350,000 copies. The game features three simple scenarios, based (albeit loosely) on familiar Old Testament stories, with crudely drawn graphics and *Mario*-style gameplay. Kids could round up the animals for Noah's ark, defeat Goliath by playing a sling-wielding David, or help Moses' mother carry the infant prophet out of Egypt. The game also introduced what would become a staple of the Christian game genre: the inclusion of quotations from scripture as part of the gameplay. In the case of *Bible Adventures*, the quotes appear as little stone tablets that provide health bonuses when read.

Later Wisdom Tree titles were merely slight modifications of old Color Dreams games. *Sunday Funday*, released in 1995, features a Bible-toting skateboarding hero who must dodge obstacles to get to Sunday school on time; the game was reworked from Color Dreams' *Menace Beach*, in which the skater-hero battled clowns and ninjas. At the end of *Menace Beach*, the winner is greeted by a bikini-clad girlfriend, who in the conclusion of *Sunday Funday* is replaced by a more modestly attired Sunday school teacher. *Sunday Funday* also included a minigame sing-along set to a tune by Christian pop vocal group 4Him. >



Later, Wisdom Tree created ports of its games for other console systems, as well as new ones like *Joshua and the Battle of Jericho*, made for the Sega Genesis, and *Super Noah's Ark 3D*, a 1994 *Wolfenstein 3D* variant that remains the only unlicensed game produced by any company for the SNES. In the mid '90s, Color Dreams left the videogame business to focus on producing webcam hardware instead, but Wisdom Tree was purchased by a former salesperson who wanted to continue its mission. It continues operation today, selling PC versions of its older games as well as a handful of newer games like *Heaven Bound*, a 3D adventure game based on John Bunyan's 17th-century allegorical novel *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

CHRISTIANS IN THE CATACOMBS

By the late 1990s, Wisdom Tree wasn't alone in the Christian game scene. Oregon minister Ralph Bagley had long been an avid gamer, but had been frustrated by what he saw as persistent satanic themes in games. So in 1996, he began approaching investors to help fund a new company to produce a Christian game for the PC market. His pitches led nowhere—that is, until the 1999 Columbine school shooting, which focused massive media attention on the fact that its perpetrators played *Doom*. Suddenly, a number of investors saw an opportunity for games Christian parents might approve of, and Bagley was able to raise close to a million dollars in startup funds to found his development company, N'Lightning Software, and create his first title, the Roman-themed 3D adventure game *Catechumen*, which was released in 2000. The game has reportedly sold over 80,000 copies, which, according to N'Lightning, makes *Catechumen* the biggest-selling Christian PC title to date.

Named after an ancient Latin term for convert, *Catechumen* takes place during the early days of the Christian Church. The player must journey into the catacombs below a Roman compound to rescue fellow believers who have been imprisoned there by their pagan captors. Though it takes its cues from shooters like *Doom*, *Catechumen* is low on realistic violence. For weaponry, a muscular, golden angel gives the hero a "sword of the spirit" that shoots laser-bolt-like holy energy. Though the sword zaps demons into red dust, Roman soldiers don't die when hit. Rather, they instantly convert to Christ, kneeling down to pray as a shower of blue sparks and golden light envelops them to the sounds of Handel's "Hallelujah" chorus. As in *Bible Adventures*, the hero can pick up bits of scripture for inspiration, here represented by scrolls.

With smooth, engaging gameplay, *Catechumen* makes clear that the concept of a Christian videogame isn't as far-fetched as it may at first seem. After all, the supernatural beings, epic battles, and divine forces found in the Bible and Church lore alike can easily match any of the Tolkeinesque mythos typically used in games—especially since the grand moral sagas of good versus evil found in fantasy literature partially trace their roots back to Christian ideas anyway. And *Catechumen* successfully deploys that oldest of Christian strategies, the spiritual allegory; American Christians are often drawn to early Church history for its underdog resonances, perhaps because it provides a metaphor for their own self-perceived struggles against mainstream secular society.

SPIRITUAL CRUSADES

The success of *Catechumen* inspired other indie Christian developers, and a new generation of games emerged that likewise drew on the history of the faith, often likewise colored with elements of fantasy. In 2002, Brethren Entertainment released *Victory at Hebron*, based on the military exploits of the Old Testament prophet Joshua. Instead of graphic battles, however, *Victory at Hebron* uses a "hero card" structure not unlike games such as *Magic: The Gathering*, and its roster of "Anakites" and "Amorite kings" sounds as exotic as anything from *World of WarCraft*. Virtue Games produced *Nocah* (2001) and its sequel, *Isles of Derek* (2003), set in a Christian-populated fantasy realm with puzzle-based play inspired by the likes of *Myst* and *Riven*. N'Lightning followed up *Catechumen* with *Ominous Horizons* in 2001. Set in the 15th century, *Ominous Horizons* sets a paladin on a quest for different parts of the first Gutenberg bible, which have been scattered across the world by Satan and must be returned to Johannes Gutenberg.

Compare the content of Christian games to a parallel rise in alternative gaming from another part of the world: The smaller array of Muslim games appearing recently from Middle Eastern groups are often based on brutally real, relatively recent historical events (such as the first Intifada in Afkar Media's *Under Ash*, or the Israel-Lebanon war in Hezbollah's *Special Force*). But Christian games prefer ancient struggles or fantasy scenarios to contemporary politics. So far, players won't, for example, find any games built around protesting abortion clinics, stopping gay marriage laws, or even promoting teen abstinence. In fact, Christian games seem to shy away from the contemporary world altogether, with many games taking on floridly abstract themes filled with allegorical symbolism.

So in 3rd Day Studios' 2004 sci-fi title *Captain Saint*, a lozenge-shaped ship is piloted through seemingly gigantic blue caverns, zapping the occasional demon or releasing captives from imprisonment, represented by sexless figures trapped inside glowing cylinders. "The objective of the game is to release prisoners of sin by firing the word of God at the sin cells [they're] trapped in," the game's website explains. "If captives listen, obey, and surrender to Jesus they'll be set free." The gothic *Eternal War: Shadows of Light*, released in 2004 by Canadian company Two Guys Software (now named Xrucifix), takes place inside the soul of John Coronado, where a messenger from God literally battles his demons. Should God's messenger need backup, the game also offers multiplayer.

Designer Marty Bee's 2004 game *Rev7 (Revelation 7)* draws on what he calls the "weird" parts of the Book of Revelation, creating a surreal world of floating heads, walking eyeballs, and killer clocks, based upon the allegory of the Seven Churches mentioned in that portion of the New Testament. Bee's follow-up, *Xibalba*, is based on an even more obscure source: a line in chapter six of Genesis, which mentions that fallen angels bred with humans in antediluvian times, producing evil offspring. In the game, a group of scientists enter caverns beneath a Mexican pyramid, where they encounter these monsters who survived the Flood. Bee believes his game has an anti-occult message, though his interpretation of Christian belief may not square with all evangelicals: In interviews, for example, he has expressed the belief that UFOs and extraterrestrials are actually demons, a correlation that may provide the basis for a future game.

THE BUSINESS OF GOD

Though Bee may represent a relatively fringe philosophy, recent developments in Christian gaming point toward a mainstreaming of the genre. The high-profile release of *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* overshadowed some less controversial Christian titles (such Christian kids' games like Crave Entertainment's 2002 *Jonah: A VeggieTales Game*, or its more recent title *The Bible Game*, a trivia game released for the PS2, Xbox, and Game Boy Advance last year) that have also penetrated larger markets. Game design is also getting a hipper: Witness Brethren's latest, *Light Rangers: Mending the Maniac Madness*, a children's game done in anime style.

Websites have also emerged to review new games and keep up with industry developments, including Gamepraise and Christian Gaming. To bring together the burgeoning industry, Rev. Bagley helped start the Christian Game Developers Foundation, which has held two annual conferences and has begun to lobby chain stores to create Christian game sections along the model of Christian music. How far Christian gaming can penetrate the mainstream remains to be seen, however—particularly at a time when the greater Christian movement has become concerned with retaining a younger generation of believers. But one thing is for sure—the genre will persist, since its developers are surely driven by a goal that supersedes market concerns. ● **Ed Halter**

AS REAL AS IT GETS

CONGRATULATIONS. YOU'VE RIGHTED YOUR PLANE. NEXT UP: EMERGENCY LANDING IN THE JUNGLES OF THE CONGO.

After that, let's see you rescue an injured climber on Mt. Kilimanjaro. Or take on the world's best pilots in the Red Bull Air Races. With 23 aircraft and over 50 real-world movers, it's the most realistic version yet. Whole cities and airports have been faithfully recreated with a 16X increase in terrain graphics. Suddenly, calling it a "simulator" just doesn't seem right.

(ACTUAL GAME SCREEN SHOT)

Microsoft game studios

Games for Windows

Intel Core 2

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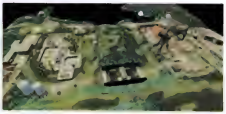
Don't want to go out with guns blazing? Pick a different route and take the bad guys by surprise.

One thing's made perfectly clear at the start of the game: You're a long way from home here, soldier.

Object damage is location-based. Aim for the truck's fuel tank and blow that sucker sky-high!

Rogue Warrior features a clean, HUD-less interface—and you can freely switch between first- and third-person perspectives.

Your squadmembers each have their own personality and specialty, from the wisecracking pilot to the cool-as-ice pointman.



On multiplayer maps, each team picks its own starting tile, and the two get connected by a randomized central tile.

ROGUE WARRIOR

No, it's not the sequel to *Cleric Mage*

PUBLISHER: **Bethesda Softworks** DEVELOPER: **Zombie Studios** GENRE: **Tactical Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2007**

PREVIEW

Four grizzled SEAL operatives lurk in a North Korean military encampment. Team leader Dick Marcinko (aka "Demo Dick" or "the Sharkman of the Delta," depending on whom you ask) has just led his four-man team through a gauntlet of carefully patrolled security points, successfully eluding and neutralizing hostiles through careful teamwork and communication, and now joins his squadmates in staring at a fire in the sky that—moments ago—would've been their extraction helo. SAMs have a funny way of changing that.

Marcinko scowls. "Well, ain't that a f***in' goat f***!"

This turn of events sets the stage for *Rogue Warrior*, Bethesda Softworks' upcoming Unreal Engine 3–powered shooter (first- *or* third-person) that mixes the stealth conventions of *Splinter Cell* and its brethren with the tactical warfare of games like *Rainbow Six*—all fed through the quality assurance scrutiny of (former) real-world SEAL operative and leading counterterrorism expert Dick Marcinko.

Marcinko's actual and fictional adventures (chronicled in his *Rogue Warrior* novel line) form the basis for the game's story. What starts off as a "simple op" (light recon work at an enemy submarine base) quickly balloons into a desperate fight for survival as the team—all but abandoned by their HQ—surreptitiously treks across war-torn North Korea en route to the faraway DMZ.

TEAM SPEAK

All told, the story (let alone the utterly generic title) doesn't sound anything but conventional. What sets this SEAL team's journey apart from other tactical ops, though: a unique ad-hoc multiplayer mode. While you certainly might enjoy having elaborate control over your teammates' flank-and-fire actions (all hotkeyed, of course), up to three friends can enter—and exit—the game as they see fit, jumping in to help with tense situations and then relinquishing control to the CPU for a quick bathroom break.

But even alongside A.I. teammates, your choices allegedly number in the multiples. Those with twitchy trigger fingers can go in with guns blazing, while more furtive tacticians might order teammates into strategically superior flanking positions to get the drop on unsuspecting targets. Plant a mine, sound the alarm, and watch the incoming transport truck go boom—or booby-trap a corpse and let his buddies trigger the explosive treat you tucked away especially for them.

And for serious armchair super-SEALs, 10 24-man multiplayer modes await, all set on various randomized maps: Each team picks its favorite starting segment, and the two sides are bridged with a randomized central zone. It circumvents the usual tedium of playing the same old arenas ad nauseam, while still offering some familiarity to battle-hardened vets. Oh, and no "bunny hopping" allowed—SEALs just don't roll that way.

● **Ryan Scott**

SWIMMING WITH THE SHARKMAN

Rogue Warrior novelist Dick "Sharkman of the Delta" Marcinko led the kind of life you only see in the movies. He served two tours in Vietnam as a Navy SEAL, wound up as the commander of SEAL Team Two in 1971, and eventually founded SEAL Team Six (the Navy's first counterterrorism unit) and later Red Cell (a unit designed to test the Navy's antiterrorism measures).

In career-speak, Marcinko's a bona fide Sam Fisher. A security expert who's broken through top-of-the-line defenses, up to and including Air Force One, the U.S. Presidential aircraft. After an illustrious 31-year career, Marcinko chronicled his experiences in his autobiography, *Rogue Warrior*, followed by a like-named line of fiction novels.

We caught up with Marcinko recently and asked him to share a few of his thoughts:

On his books: "My next novel goes into much more detail on what's happening in North Korea; the game will certainly stem from the book—especially in terms of geography and geopolitical elements. Is it fiction...or prediction?"

On the *Rogue Warrior* game: "I'm involved to help with authenticity, and [the team] reminds me what is technically feasible. It's a comfortable marriage, and they're receptive to suggestions that help make the game more authentic."

On the SEAL life: "Being a SEAL is to live a life of reverse engineering. If you know how to make it, you know how to break it."

> UP TO THREE FRIENDS CAN ENTER—AND EXIT—THE GAME AS THEY SEE FIT.

1997
Founds Quantic Dream studio and begins work on Omikron.
quantic dream
A1
1999
Produces Omikron: The Nomad Soul (simply Nomad Soul in Europe) for Eidos. David Bowie voices a character and composes songs for the game's soundtrack.
omikron
B2
2005
Produces Fahrenheit (also known as Indigo Prophecy) for Atari.
C3
2006
Reveals promo (called "The Casting") for forthcoming Quantic Dream release Heavy Rain.
D4

THE GFW INTERVIEW: DAVID CAGE

Engaging emotion BY SHAWN ELLIOTT

INTERVIEW

GFW: What's been the bigger impediment to successful interactive storytelling so far: inexperienced writers—in terms of medium—or insufficient A.I.?

David Cage: Writers try to create a planned experience, try to create the illusion of choice for the player who, in fact, is only choosing between a definite set of different options. With A.I., we're talking about emergent storytelling. Nothing is written in advance, except the behavior of narrative agents, and storytelling emerges naturally from the rules that you established.

As far as I know, no title that truly uses emergent storytelling [exists]. It is, however, a fascinating angle for the future, and we will need not only advanced A.I. but also believable text-to-speech and speech-to-text audio, as characters will need to generate speech on the fly without a preestablished script.

But, back to your question, it's bad to accuse writers of being inexperienced. Our medium still has no strongly established language and we're inventing our own grammar game after game. Once such a grammar is established, writers will have all they need to make new masterpieces. Some of the 21st century's major creators will come from our medium.

GFW: What types of experiences might Turing A.I.—that is, A.I. capable of carrying on a humanlike conversation—enable?

DC: Well, we aren't anywhere near that point at the moment. Giving A.I. the capacity to generate meaning and emotion is an extreme challenge.

GFW: In a recent *CGW* interview (*CGW* #266, pg. 24), *BioShock* creator Ken Levine called dialogue trees "the most broken thing in gaming." Agree? Disagree? Are you attempting to work out alternative ways to create conversation?

DC: I disagree. Dialogue trees are virtually unexplored; [existing] attempts are shy and awkward. I'm convinced that such systems can offer incredible complexity if used right. The question in my mind is much more about expanding the tree's branching system, making it so complex that the structure becomes invisible for the player while remaining manageable for the writer. So, sure, I still see dialogue trees, combined with other elements, as the most accessible means of creating story-centered conversation.

That said, it is true that dialogue in general isn't often perceived as the most exciting part of a game. In terms of finding fresh solutions, our industry has massively failed. I tried a few things in *Nomad Soul*/*Omikron* and *Fahrenheit*/*Indigo Prophecy*. I'm attracted to the idea of a strong time constraint to maintain the natural flow of actual dialogue. I also appreciate that players are able to decide to make dialogue shorter or longer based on level of interest.

At present, I'm working on new solutions for *Heavy Rain*, trying to make dialogue feel as fluid and natural as possible.

GFW: In a recent *Harper's Magazine* roundtable, game designer Raph Koster (*Ultima Online*, *EverQuest II*) says, "Games aren't trying to teach you to assemble stories; they're trying to give you the story experience. Which is why their stories are like really, really bad movie scripts." Your thoughts?

DC: I cannot disagree more. It's difficult to tell good stories in games for several reasons. First in my mind is that most games are based on repetitive patterns, whereas storytelling hates patterns. What kinds of stories can we tell when our heroes can only accomplish the same 10, almost always physical, actions?

I also take issue with the idea that the ultimate goal of games should be to allow gamers to create their own stories. It's a very interesting proposition, but I'm not sure that all gamers want to become storytellers per se.

GFW: Whether or not it's the medium's business to *provide* story, as opposed to offering the pieces necessary for a story's assembly, it has ended up doing the former....

DC: Look at it like a pair of rails between which the player is free. If the distance between the rails is negligible, the game is linear. If the distance is great, the player has a lot of freedom. Most games, whether they're action games or adventure games, offer only a very limited gap, and a player's main option is how slowly or swiftly he wants to ride the rails. We are progressively expanding this possibility space, allowing the player not only to set his speed, but also to modify the experience according to his actions.

That said, providing more power to the player is not the ultimate goal. In my mind, any art form, including interactivity, is an emotional experience. The pleasure it creates comes from the emotions it makes us feel. As for storytelling, I think that total freedom is fine and fun, but it's equally exciting to experience a story designed by someone else, one that stretches beyond one's own imagination.

Take, for example, *World of WarCraft*. You could say that players create their own stories and are completely free to interact in the world and with other players. Most of the time, however, the results are weak, to say the least. So sure, each variety of experience can be interesting in a different way, but deciding that one is best for videogames would only limit the medium's scope.

GFW: In the same *Harper's* story, writer Steve Johnson argues that, "Narratives tend to be a vestigial part of games that has been carried over from earlier forms [....] I doubt that games are capable of dealing with psychological depth at all... [the games] are about external systems and rules, and interiority is something they just don't do very well." Meanwhile, you're emphasizing emotional states....

DC: Again, I cannot disagree more. Telling stories is one of the oldest human activities. Humans have tried to tell stories with every single medium we've created, from paintings on cave walls to theater, literature, movies, >

"INTERACTIVITY IS ABOUT TO FINISH ITS ADOLESCENCE. IN WHICH IT INVESTED MAINLY IN PRIMITIVE AND INTENSE EMOTIONS."

—DAVID CAGE

or television. Why should interactivity be an exception?

Videogames are capable of creating the same diversity and stirring the same depth of emotion as any other medium. Interactivity is about to finish its adolescence, in which it invested mainly in primitive and intense emotions. Cinema experienced a similar period. Now, reaching adulthood and maturity, we're able to offer deeper and more meaningful experiences that stir subtle emotions.

One of the main difficulties is that interactivity is always about physical action as opposed to more abstract processes. I'm especially interested in exploring how we can represent and interact with emotions. How can we make you endure pain in a torture scene, for example, and make it a true challenge for you to resist and not reveal what you know? How can we re-create pain/resistance/relief?

GFW: *Fahrenheit* became *Indigo Prophecy* when it was introduced in the U.S. Was that Quantic Dream's doing, or Atari's, or Michael Moore's, and why?

DC: Atari's marketing department in the U.S. made the decision without consulting us. The term "Indigo Prophecy" is never used as such in the 2,000-page design document. In troubled political times in the U.S., they feared possible confusion with Michael Moore's [*Fahrenheit 9/11*] movie. I personally think it was a terrible decision and I was totally against the name change. They thought they knew what they were doing, and they didn't. I had the same experience with my previous game *Omikron*, called *Nomad Soul* in Europe. It seems that some mistakes have to be made several times for some people to understand them....

GFW: Johnson also argues that we're now seeing traditional forms of storytelling, such as TV's almost *Myst*-like *Lost*, borrow elements from games. What, if any, story-telling elements in general are indigenous to games?

DC: I wouldn't say we've invented anything so far, except maybe the strange way we try to allow our audience to modify the story through action. The tendency to track multiple characters is definitely common in games, but we didn't invent it. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is a classic example of a similar structure in literature.

It is true, though, that today's directors [have] played videogames since they were children and that this is a major part of their culture. Sometimes I'm surprised to see the types of camera shots we use in games—even with the inherent technical imperfections due to our constraints—appear in movies.

[But it works back and forth]; we'll try to copy more exploratory works from other media until, ultimately, we create something truly original and unique of our own. At the same time, I'm tired of seeing 50 games per year about the Second World War, about trolls and goblins, not to mention urban outlaws shooting motorists to steal their cars. In that matter, I'm often impressed with some Japanese creators who seem more inclined to invent new worlds.

GFW: What, if anything, characterizes French games?

DC: I don't think that anything characterizes French games anymore. This industry is world-wide, and one in which America represents 50 percent of our sales expectations. We have a great history with adventure games (Delphine, Infogrames, and so on), but these aren't representative of French production anymore. Nowadays, you'll find FPS, RTS, racing, sports—almost all styles are represented.

I don't like to be treated like a teenager. I don't think that destroying stuff is cool in and of itself. I need a context, I need to know why I'm doing what I'm doing, and I like video-games that encourage emotional involvement. These are the types of experiences I try to create. I don't know how French you need to be to want gaming to evolve, but I have the feeling that I'm not the only one....

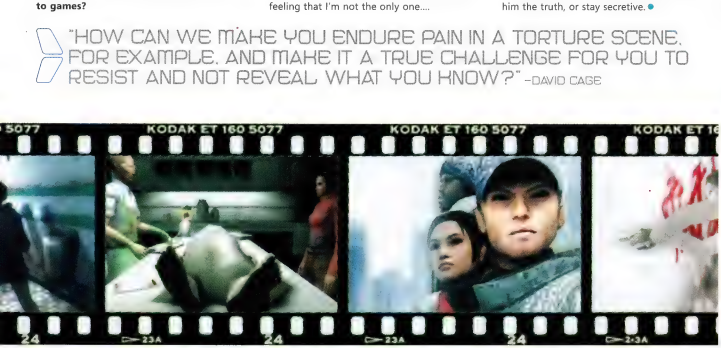
GFW: Do you suspect you might feel less disconnected from your projects compared to some American directors?

DC: I don't know about American directors, but I live and breathe my projects on a daily basis. I think about them every minute, from the second I open my eyes in the morning until I close them. I've also been lucky enough to benefit from complete creative freedom from my publishers. And, I've never done a project for money; [I've worked on games] only because I believed in what I was doing. I hope American directors are in the same situation, because it's the most exciting way of working in this industry...feeling free to invent and innovate.

GFW: How much can happen in a single-room setting such as that in *Heavy Rain*'s "The Casting" clip? Say if, instead of finding the flashing drawer with the password inside, we must sort through and scan someone's personal effects in order to decide whether or not we trust them....

DC: When we presented "The Casting" at the Electronic Entertainment Expo, I feared that we went too far. Most stuff there would show epic battles in which entire cities were destroyed, and meanwhile we're presenting a woman talking in her kitchen for four minutes. But so much happened in this kitchen. Several people told me that this was the first time they'd experienced such a strong emotional response to real-time 3D. It's definitely far from perfect, but we're starting to open the door to a different type of experience. For me, it demonstrates that games might generate an endless range of emotions. And that was my intent with *Fahrenheit*, too—trying to move from obvious physical interactions to a more abstract and also richer psychological model. In a nutshell, I meant to move the center of interest from deciding where I want to shoot to deciding how I want to treat an ex-girl-friend; if I should trust a character and tell him the truth, or stay secretive. ●

"HOW CAN WE MAKE YOU ENDURE PAIN IN A TORTURE SCENE, FOR EXAMPLE, AND MAKE IT A TRUE CHALLENGE FOR YOU TO RESIST AND NOT REVEAL WHAT YOU KNOW?" –DAVID CAGE



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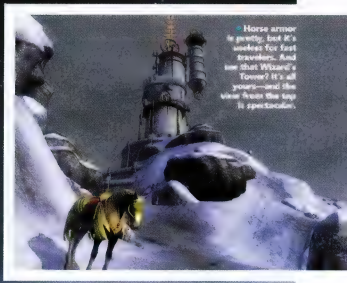
What you can't see here is that we're actually several thousand feet in the air, directly over the Imperial City. (Sorry, Supes fans—we didn't get there by flying.)



Horse armor is pretty, but it's useless for fast travelers. And now that Wizard's Tower? It's all yours—and the view from the top is spectacular.

KNIGHTS OF THE NINE: THE DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT COLLECTION

All of *Oblivion's* official plug-ins, plus a brand-new faction quest

PUBLISHER: **2K Games** DEVELOPER: **Bethesda Softworks** GENRE: **RPG** RELEASE DATE: **November**

PREVIEW

Quiz time: What do *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* and Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* have in common? Many owners, few completists. Getting through most (much less *all*) of *Oblivion* is one of those things they ought to sell T-shirts for...like rounding up a matching set of legendary items in *World of WarCraft*—or, heck, climbing Mount Everest. For those with appetites like black holes, Bethesda has even more love in store for the medieval province of Cyrodiil, but unlike *Morrowind*'s hefty add-ons, *Oblivion*'s first collection turns out *not* to be a real expansion at all.

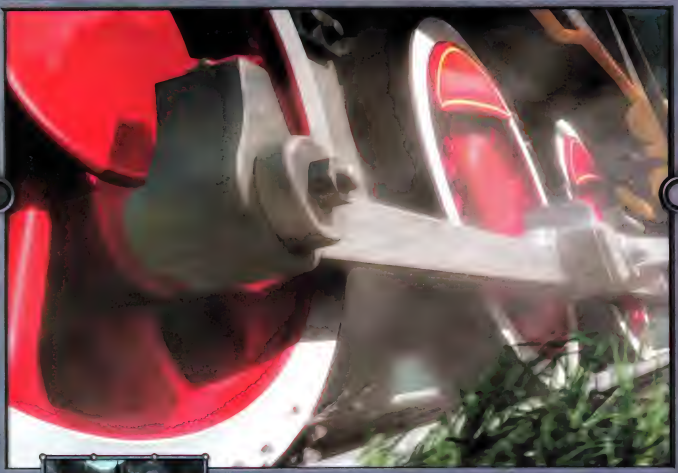
Remember the horse-armor brouhaha? Bethesda's first plug-in for *Oblivion* cost $2 and amounted to a tiny 6.2MB download that basically pimped your pony-ride. Fans were not impressed. Bethesda reacted by releasing broader (and, frankly, cooler) content plug-ins for roughly the same price, making amends for Mr. Ed's Really Not-So-Amazing Technicolor Coat and, to date, raising the downloadable content tally to seven. Make that eight with "Knights of the Nine" this November, a mega-plug-in you can download stand-alone for a few extra bucks or find on store shelves as part of Bethesda's "downloadable content collection," which packages the whole lot for $20.

Compared to its smaller peers, "Knights of the Nine" (not "Knights of the White Stallion," wherever that silly rumor came from) is a meaty 150MB quest sporting a brand-new faction with its own character sheet tag and ranks. It kicks off when you hear of an attack on the Chapel of Dibella in Anvil, and a "mysterious" prophet preaching (and occasionally snoozing) nearby. Grill him, and he tells you about the latest Big Bad, an Ayleid sorceror-king named Umaril, then sends you on a quest for the oh-so-tasty-sounding "Relics of the Crusader." I'll leave off there to save spoilers, but suffice to say, our hands-on with this plug-in didn't disappoint—it's substantial, fully produced with voiceovers, and adds an estimated 10 hours of hunt-and-brawl (if you're up for more of that, anyway).

As for the others, they've been out for several months at www.oblivionDownloads.com. Horse Armor? Check. Spell-granting Spell Tomes? Check. An Orrery that tweaks your stats? Check. An underground crawl through one of Cyrodiil's "deepest and most challenging dungeons"? Check. The coolest three are probably the Wizard's Tower, Thieves Den, and Vile Lair, which offer magical, stealth, and vampiric hideouts, respectively.

Worth 20 bucks? Probably, but we hope Bethesda has at least one real expansion in them before they shift into full *Fallout 3* mode. ● **Matt Peckham**

FORGE YOUR RAIL EMPIRE



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GLADSTONED

Senior editor Darren Gladstone challenges you to "Beat the Geek"

COLUMN

I know what you're thinking: "Who the hell is this Gladstone guy, and why does *he* rank his own monthly magazine column?" Buddy, I'm about to become your worst nerdly nightmare. I started writing text adventures with a Texas Instruments TI-99/4A back in 1981. I broke up with my first girlfriend over the phone while playing *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar*. (I had my priorities straight even back then.) Think you got the chops to take me on, punk? Prove it. I've assembled 10 questions spanning 25 glorious years of computer games. Let's do this!

1. Which classic Japanese shooter did Sierra On-Line introduce to the United States?
a. *Gradius*
b. *1942*
c. *Silpheed*
d. *Turrican*

2. Both a 1997 graphic adventure game and 1999 role-playing game featured wisecracking skulls as sidekicks. Name the games. (Add one bonus point for each skull's name.)

3. The *Duke Nukem* series started as...
a. ...a first-person shooter
b. ...a 2D platformer
c. ...a graphic adventure
d. ...a role-playing game

4. Based upon a famous strategy text, this is one of the earliest—if not the first—RTS games. Name it.

5. Who are the Two Guys from Andromeda, and with which game are they associated?

6. The first game id Software created was...
a. *Dangerous Dave*
b. *Commander Keen*
c. *Doom*
d. *Wolfenstein 3D*

7. What infamous full-motion videogame helped spark the videogame violence congressional hearings in 1992?
a. *Night Trap*
b. *Corpse Killer*
c. *A Fork in the Tale*
d. *Phantasmagoria*

8. Which IPs came first: Blizzard's *WarCraft* and *StarCraft*, or Games Workshop's *Warhammer* and *Warhammer 40,000* game series?

9. True or false: There was a rumor that you could access a secret cow level in *Diablo II* by socketing Wirt's Leg with a perfect Topaz gem.

10. Who is Iolo FitzOwen?

***EXTRA: Got a tough question for me? Best submission gets something off my desk.**

Answers: 1. c 2. The Curse of Monkey Island (Murray) and Planescape Torment (Morte). 3. B 4. Chess (Victorian Conversation and Chess, 4,000 ? [why it was known to the Arabs as the game of kings] and Shatranj [the game from which chess is derived]) 5. Dave Winer and Jon Udell, Microsoft Word 6. B 7. B 8. Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 9. False 10. Tome of Town Portal in the Horadric Cube. 10. A famed bard in the land of *Ultima's* Britannia

YOUR SCORE

1–3: Sorry, you have too much of a life. You probably actually talk to girls in bars and stuff.

4–5: Not bad... get your geek on.

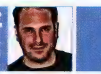
6–7: You have graduated with past Gladstonians, but you've yet to unlock all the gear for *EverQuest 2* or get your first mount in *World of WarCraft*.

8: Underpwnage. U r teh l33t.

9: You've achieved nerdhood. Embrace your inner Darren, grasshopper.

10 or more: Friggin' chuuter! Using Wikipedia for turning the page upside-down doesn't count.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY DARREN GLADSTONE



Darren Gladstone

What most called "darky," senior editor Darren Gladstone called "career training." How'd you score? E-mail darren_gladstone@ziffdavis.com.

ARE YOU READY TO MATCH WITS WITH A COMPUTER GAMING HALF-WIT?

THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY: DECEMBER 2006

Our take on the gaming's Wild West

THE GOOD

CHILD'S PLAY CHARITY

Since 2003, the world-famous webcomic duo at Penny Arcade has run Child's Play, a grassroots charity committed to providing games, toys, and money for sick children around the world. With the holiday season coming up fast, they need all the donations they can get. You can donate at various children's hospitals or via PayPal—hit www.childsplaycharity.org for details.

THE BAD

GREATEST MISSES

Want to play Sierra's classic *King's Quest*, *Space Quest*, *Leisure Suit Larry*, or *Police Quest* adventure games on XP? Do yourself a favor and load up your own copies on DOSBox. Just don't shell out for the half-baked budget compilations currently cluttering the local Wal-Mart. The shoddy implementation and flimsy packaging show little respect to some of the most beloved classics in computer gaming history.

THE UGLY

NBA DEAD 07

An angry group of *NBA Live* fans, upset at *NBA Live 07*'s awfulness (see pg. 104 for our review), recently published an open letter to publisher EA to speak their minds on just how low the franchise has sunk: "*NBA Live 07* is the final straw. Until this release, we overlooked [the] flaws.... But this release has ignited feelings that EA doesn't care about its fans." Read the full letter at www.nbalive.org.

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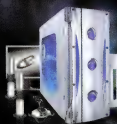

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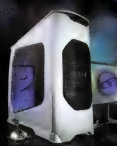

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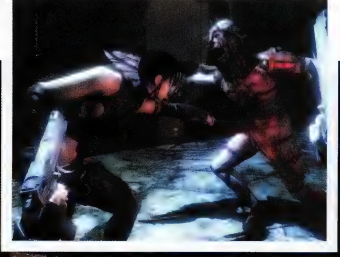

CLIVE BARKER'S JERICHO

Oh, the horror

Pentagram-branded biomechanical monsters, compliments of Clive Barker.

Codemasters | Mercury Steam | First-Person Shooter/Adventure | 18+

PREVIEW

Call it convergence: Steven Spielberg sleeping with Electronic Arts, Peter Jackson opening an interactive studio and partnering with Microsoft, and now, Clive Barker clasping hands with Codemasters to create his own horror videogame.

"I think top talent is attracted to videogames because our art is becoming better at telling stories in an interesting and interactive manner," says Enric Alvarez, project lead on *Jericho*, Barker's new foray into the interactive arena. "Games aren't turning into movies, but games are maturing the same way movies did way back when. We're entering an exciting era—a time to explore and try new things."

Any relation to *F.E.A.R.* may or may not be coincidental: Players take the reins of a seven-man Special Forces strike team tasked with protecting U.S. interests from paranormal threats. Apparently, each squad member is an expert in modern warfare and "different parapsychological disciplines" (think: clairvoyance, exorcism, and so on), and players are able to play as any and all of them when and where they want. Alvarez is quick to point out that *Jericho* isn't "survival-horror" per se. "*Resident Evil 4* brought survival-horror closer to straight action; *Jericho* brings action gaming closer to survival-horror—tons of ammo, fast-paced action, gruesome enemies, and the like."

The mayhem takes place in Al-Khali, a modern Middle Eastern city built atop the ruins of previous conquerors, from which an evil (at least as ancient as *Poltergeist*) is threatening to spread across the earth. Players lead the *Jericho* team into the flaming ruins of the city, moving block by block toward the dimensional rift. "With tensions already running high in the region, this is the sort of thing that could trigger the Apocalypse," reads the game's info sheet; whether players will encounter some sort of civil/religious war along the way remains unclear, but such an intersection would offer interesting fodder for a horror game...if handled properly. ■ **Evan Shamoon**

ON ORIGINS

So why the small screen instead of the silver one, Mr. Barker? "I know that Clive has always been interested in games because he sees the increasing narrative potential and recognizes the level of immersion that only games can provide," says *Jericho* project lead Enric Alvarez. "When conceiving *Jericho*, as Clive puts it, the idea just 'felt' more like a game, than, say, a book, movie, or TV show. Only time will tell if this particular prophecy rings true."

Nantuko Husk
Serra Angel
Creature — Angel
Flying (This creature can't be blocked except by creatures with flying or reach.)
3/4

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RANDOM ACCESS

10 things we're into this month

1 HAWAII FIVE-O

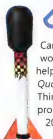
We're still waiting for *Test Drive Unlimited* to show up on the PC, but we found a new use for the console game—a mini vacation. On rainy days, fire up the Xbox 360 game, and it's like you're living large in Oahu!

2 ATARI KEYCHAINS

If you have tiny hands and a burning urge to play classic Atari games, go to thinkgeek.com and get this $15 game "system." It dangles on your keychain when not plugged into a TV. Just don't expect HD.

3 BARK AT THE MOON

Kit Whitfield's *Bloodhound* isn't your usual were-wolf book. It's a twisty wit detective-noir flavor and some-thing to say about...racism? 99 percent of the population is werewolves. Lola Galley is a downtrodden "bamback" who tends to strays during full moons.



4 FLY ME TO THE MOON

If id's John Carmack can build a real-world rocket when he isn't helping with *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*, why can't you? Thinkgeek.com's hydrogen-propelled rocket ($40) blasts 200 feet into the air using a combination of citric acid and water. Too bad cars can't run on it.

5 LION KING UNDER FIRE

It's the spring of 2003. During an American bombing raid, lions escape from the Baghdad Zoo—true story. But what do the animals make of what's happening? The graphic novel *Pride of Baghdad* tells the tale through their eyes.

6 PARLEZ-VOUS "OUCH"?

Within the first five minutes of the French-wrought near-future action flick *District 813*, you'll see moves you once thought were only possible in the *Prince of Persia* games.

7 BATFAN

Hey Hollywood, stop paying attention! For all the lame comic book-based movies you shovel out each year, this short Batman fan film from a couple years back still shows all you guys up. If you haven't seen *Batmen: Dead End*, head to www.colliorastudios.com right away.

8 SEXYTIME!

Never heard of crack (or maybe we should say "on crack") Kazakh documentarian Borat? Brit comic Sacha Baron Cohen travels across America in character, spouting politically incorrect comments to real people, catching everything on camera. You need to see the awkwardly titled flick *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*.

9 ROAD RULES

Use a public PC, and some fool will wind up with your PIN and embarrassing list of movie rentals. The Memorex TravelDrive U3 ($25, www.memorex.com) is an encrypted flash drive and antivirus/anti-spyware security suite that travels with you.

10 NERDWEAR

Let your dork flag fly with awe-some *World of WarCraft*–centric threads from jinx.com. Our personal favorites: the quest-giver "!" and "?" caps. Unfortunately, we'll have to start handing out rewards. Fortunately, we only rate as a low-level quest.

PIPELINE

Save some cash for these upcoming games

NOVEMBER 2006	PUBLISHER
1701 A.D.	Aspyr Media
Agatha Christie: Murder on the Orient Express	DreamCatcher
Battleground Europe: World War II Online	Matrix Games
Bionicle Heroes	Eidos Interactive
Charlotte's Web	Sega
Deal or No Deal	Take 2 Interactive
Eragon	Vivendi Games
EverQuest II: Echoes of Faydwer	SOE
The Fifth Disciple	Conega Publishing
Gods & Heroes: Rome Rising	SOE
Gothic 3	Aspyr Media
Great Invasions	Strategy First
Left Behind: Eternal Forces	Left Behind Games
LOTR: The Battle for Middle-earth II—The Rise of the Witch-king	Electronic Arts
Medieval II: Total War	Sega
Rayman Raving Rabbids	Ubisoft
Star Shatterer: Gathering Storm	Tri Synergy
Star Trek: Legacy	Bethesda
Warhammer: Mark of Chaos	Namco Bandai
World of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade	Blizzard
DECEMBER 2006	
Call of Juarez	Ubisoft
Monopoly Here and Now	Encore Software
JANUARY 2007	
Alan Wake	Microsoft
Anarchy Online: Lost Eden	Funcom
Earache Extreme Metal Racing	Metro3D
Frontlines: Fuel of War	THQ
Heart of Empire: Rome	Paradox
Sam Suede: Undercover Exposure	iBaze
Storm of War: Battle of Britain	Ubisoft
Supreme Commandar	THQ
Surrender? "Nuts!"	Kudosoft
Vanguard: Saga of Heroes	SOE
War Front: Turning Point	CDV Software
WINTER 2007	
Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures	Funcom
Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	Electronic Arts
Crysis	Electronic Arts
Dead Reefs	DreamCatcher
Genesis Rising: The Universal Crusade	DreamCatcher
Haze	Ubisoft
Huxley	Webzen
L.A. Street Racer	Groove Games
The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar	Midway
Maelstrom	Codemasters
Patriot National Guard	DreamCatcher
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl	THQ
Shadowrun	Microsoft
Test Drive Unlimited	Atari
TimeShift	Vivendi Games

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DOCTORS & DRAGONS

BioWare returns home to PC roleplaying with *Dragon Age*

EXCLUSIVE FIRST LOOK

"Who are you here to visit?" asks the dowdy 60-year-old customs official at the Edmonton International Airport.

"BioWare. They make videoga..."

"Oh, BioWare, eh?" the agent interrupts, inking his passport stamp. "They're the hottest gamemaker in North America, ya know." He can't wait to get his hands on *Mass Something-or-Other* for the Xbox 360.

Up here, it's hard to find someone who doesn't recognize the name of BioWare, a company founded by two University of Alberta med students looking for more out of life than just a cure for cancer. The blip on BioWare's life-sign monitor traces a bizarre course from medical science to hard science fiction, from *Gastroenterology Patient Simulator* to *Baldur's Gate* and some of the finest PC role-playing games ever. But when the developer detoured into console territory with *Knights of the Old Republic*, *Jade Empire*, and *Mass Effect*, it left the PC faithful wondering whether their beloved BioWare was leaving them behind.

So now it falls to *Dragon Age*, the company's first PC-only RPG since 2002's *Neverwinter Nights*, to set things right. Join us now for the world's first look at this spiritual successor to *Baldur's Gate*; then hear what BioWare cofounders Greg Zeschuk and Ray Muzyka have to say about roleplaying's past, present, and future. >

BY DARREN GLADSTONE AND SEAN MOLLOY

Blue is beautiful.

It's only 10 in the morning, but *Dragon Age* project director Scott Greig has already bled for his game today.

"I managed to slice my hand on one of the practice swords," Greig says, pulling the culprit from its sheath, taking care not to disturb the fresh bandage between his thumb and index finger. "Who would have thought they'd be sharp? But it's nice having doctors on the premises...and it's, um, interesting that you can send out an IM to one guy in the company and the next day your office is filled with swords and giant axes."

Greig has been with BioWare for nearly 11 years—the first official employee of the company cofounded by doctors/game geeks Greg Zeschuk and Ray Muzyka (see interview, pg. 76). Raised as lead programmer on *Baldur's Gate* and *Neverwinter Nights*, Greig is no stranger to BioWare role-playing games—or the complex process of making them. And today isn't the first time he's taken up arms for *Dragon Age*'s cause.

"When we started concepting what *Dragon Age*'s combat would be, we wanted to get a tight visual reference for the combat team," he says. "So myself, [lead animator] John Santos, and a couple others got a bunch of swords and shields and sticks and stuff and went to the parkade—the parking lot of one of Edmonton's malls—and set up a video camera on the second floor, looking down, so we could film it from the game point of view. We were out there hitting each other and going, 'I think the shield bash should be like *this*!' as a bunch of people across the street watched from their balcony with binoculars. Then a woman in a pickup truck came and said, 'What are you doing? This is private property!' and...well, let's say she escorted us off the premises."

Greig and Santos show off the fruit of their loiterous LARPing in an early prototype of *Dragon Age*'s tactical combat system. A player character in ratty armor with a shield and sword comes across three ugly orcish things in the street. At first, the camera is behind the player's shoulder—"Explore Mode," Greig calls it—but as the enemies take notice and move in to attack, the camera swings up to a nearly top-down, parkade-inspired perspective. Greig explains that you can issue commands to your party (four characters all told, at least for now) in real time, pause the action, and queue up spells and special attacks—comforting words for anyone who's ventured through *Baldur's Gate*. As the quartet trades blows, swords clash against swords, and weapons don't just whoosh through the enemy's polygons—they react. When the deadlock breaks, the hero raises his shield to block the foe to the side, and then swivels to the third to knock him to the ground with a shield bash.

"We wanted to make sure that when you look at a fight, it's not just swing, swing, swing...we want to make it look like these guys are actually fighting and reacting. And we're making sure group combat is really cool—it's not just two guys fighting; you can actually have synchronized attacks with the people around you, too."

"Instead of people standing toe-to-toe," adds Santos, "you're actually seeing people duck and move and attack. Every time they get hit, you feel for them because they just got bashed in the head with something really heavy.

"Have you ever seen that HBO series *Rome*? Take a look at the gladiator fight in episode 11 and you'll get a good idea of what we're thinking of."

THE ITERATION GAME

Some recurring themes in our BioWare tour: *Dragon Age*'s Eclipse engine tools are built to iterate, iterate, iterate; good games require a lot of back-and-forth at the back end...without having to worry too much about production time; and if a level, game, or section is just not fun, it's just not done.

Most of *Dragon Age*'s production efforts till now have focused on creating powerful tools, but Greig says the content will come together quickly enough for a winter 2007/early 2008 release. The tools will be made public in some form, but don't expect the ease of use of *Neverwinter Nights*' construction kit.

"It's going to take more time for the basic user to make levels," says level artist Andrew Farrell, demonstrating advanced techniques such as the ability to create overhangs in the terrain. "But there's a lot more power, and the levels will be a lot better."

Large-scale combat is also on the top of Greig's mind—no surprise for a game where here, one naturally assumes, there be dragons. "Remember the cave troll fight in *The Fellowship of the Ring*? That's what our large creature combat is going to be like. You've got the party guys running out, one guy jumping up on the back and stabbing, the other guy ducking between the legs." Objects in the environment can be manipulated in your bid for tactical supremacy: Knock over a table to fire arrows or shoot fireballs from behind cover, but only where it makes sense—emergence be damned, in BioWare's reckoning. "There will be a lot of ways of going through combat, and lots of different ways to interact with the environment...but our philosophy is that handcrafted is always better than random stuff."

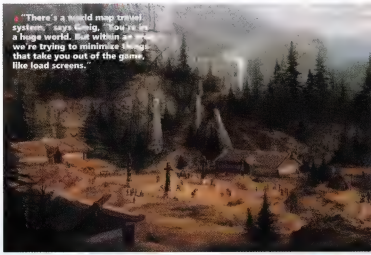
DRAGON YEAR ZERO

Step back in time to E3, 2004 AD, when BioWare teased PC RPG fandom with a brief glimpse of *Dragon Age* for the first (and for the past two-plus years, only) time. "That," explains Greig, "was our proof-of-concept test. We had just finished *Neverwinter Nights* and were thinking we needed to do something that's gonna be *Baldur's Gate*, only next-generation—with all the in-depth story stuff, all the characters, only much more cinematic and visceral. We had the idea to put together the exploration view of *Knights of the Old Republic* and capture the party-based action-packed combat of *Baldur's Gate*, only in 3D and advanced, so [that demo] was really a test to put that together...we knew it was early, but we wanted to make sure fans knew we were working on PC games, too. We'd just done *KOTOR*, *Jade Empire* was coming out, we knew *Mass Effect* was about to be announced (all for the Xbox or Xbox 360), and we just wanted to reassure our PC fans we hadn't forgotten them."

A lot has happened since then. "We've spent the last two to three years just having artists and writers put together what the world is, what the story is for *Dragon Age*. [Back then], we were still working on the Aurora-engine level—*NWN*, *KOTOR*, and even *Jade Empire* were part of that technology chain—and realized that it wasn't gonna cut it. So we went back to the drawing board and started working on the brand-new engine, the Eclipse engine that's gonna be in *Dragon Age*."

While BioWare is loath to spoil the specifics of its world or characters, they're open about their influences—we hear George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series spill from more than one pair of lips, and the art direction takes a note from Frank Frazetta's Conan paintings. Folks utter the word "dark" at least four dozen times; "mature," "realistic," and "sophisticated" aren't far behind.

"'Dark heroic fantasy' really captures what the world is all about," echoes Greig. "The grittiness, the horror elements, blood, dirt—it's going to be a lot darker than anything we've done in the past. We still wanted to capture the high fantasy elements. There are heroes, villains, obviously dragons—it's called *Dragon Age*, after all—but it's more than just your standard 'take fantasy elements and toss them together' game. We wanted to make a living, breathing world that actually had a realistic feel to it. If people *actually* had magic, how would they react to it? If someone could walk into a room and point a finger and turn you into a fireball, this isn't something anyone would take casually. If this were history, and we had these situations with magic and monsters and creatures, how would this work out?" Even the name of the game is meant to ground the fantasy in history—this is the Dragon Age, meant to stand in a line tucked amidst the Bronze Age, Steel Age, and Industrial Age. >



● "There's a world map travel system," says Greig. "But it's not a huge world. But within an area we're trying to minimize things that take you out of the game, like load screens."

"REMEMBER THE CAVE TROLL FIGHT FROM *THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING*? THAT'S WHAT OUR LARGE CREATURE COMBAT IS GOING TO BE LIKE."

–SCOTT GREIG, PROJECT DIRECTOR, BIOWARE

● You run around in a behind-the-shoulder "Explore Mode." When you fight, you switch to an overhead "tactical" perspective (with the option to opt out, of course).

As in any BioWare game, characters—and moral choices—tower over everything, though Greig says it isn't as simple as light-side points and dark-side points, open palm and closed fist. "Yes, you're the hero, or the antihero, depending on how you play, but it's going to be a lot more organic. You basically have to save the world, but what the world is like when you're done—that's totally up to you and the choices you make throughout the game. You're literally going to decide the fate of nations, who's becoming king, what nations are actually around after…what *races* are around. You're going to have to make some hard choices in the game, but we want all the choices to be clear. The player's gonna know if he does this, there's a really horrific consequence. Decisions are gonna be hard…and sort of shocking."

But before you get to the who lives and who dies, one of the first decisions you need to make is just what kind of character you want to play—and *Dragon Age* wants to make sure that, whatever your preferred poison, it's got you covered. "We use a class-based system that has levels—we're staying that close to our *D&D* roots. You start off with three basic classes, the wizard, fighter, and rogue, just to get you started. Very quickly, you get access to advanced classes, and even within those classes you get to customize abilities, stats, and talents—you buy points, build it up, and after a short while you'll be able to pick even more advanced classes. If you want to have a fighter-type character with magic-like abilities, there'll be a route

stories." Rather than just offer multiple endings, *Dragon Age* offers multiple beginnings, too.

"Say, for example, you want to be a dwarf—you'll have different choices for what kind of setting in the dwarf environment you start in. So if you pick dwarf noble, then you're part of the royal family in one of the dwarven cities, and that's where we start you off. And you spend the first hour or two of the game interacting with that world. You get to learn all about the dwarves and the plots that are going on, and major things happen to you personally. We also introduce at that point a nemesis for you—not the main villain in the game, but someone who's going to be dogging your footsteps throughout *Dragon Age*, and eventually you'll have to come face-to-face and deal with him. Your nemesis will be different depending on your origin.

"One of the other options is a dwarf commoner—pick that, and you start off working the sort of dwarf underclass. The nobles have their honor, but you start off down in the gritty and real dwarf environment, and you have to struggle through the street stuff…you have to work to forge your place in the underworld of dwarf society. And it's a completely different story—you'll run into some of the same characters [that] you would as the dwarf noble, but they'll treat you and react to you differently."

Once you've played through your chosen origin, world events intersect, and you'll find yourself pulled into the same plot as all the rest—with

***Dragon Age*'s real-time tactical combat descends directly from *Baldur's Gate*. Queue up commands for your party of four (for now), and pause the action whenever you need to be pen**

you can take for that. If you want to be a barbarian berserker, you can do that, too…there's a route for everyone so players can build their character the way they want. There's a stupid number of class abilities and special abilities…I think it's more than in any other BioWare game."

THE WRITERS' RIDDLE

While character customization is grand, it poses a conundrum for writers striving to build a better, stronger character-driven narrative: How do you write a story appropriate for both a beer-swigging, meat-inhaling dwarven soldier and a holier-than-thou high elf—without resorting to prison cells, amnesia, or fresh-from-the-boat strangers in a strange land? "We've watched how people play our games," Greig says, "and found there are a few common archetypes people like to play. They'll always play the same character in different settings—if you're the 'elf archer guy,' you play that kind of character in every game. So we looked at the common archetypes and said, 'OK, we're going to let you play your character in the world, *and* it's going to make sense. So one of the big things we're doing is origin

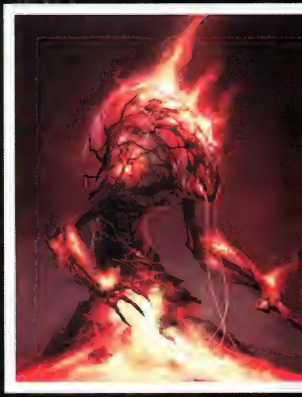
different twists and side quests based on your roots. "If you go back into the dwarf city, depending on whether you were a dwarf noble or a dwarf commoner or an elf or human from one of the other stories, the NPCs will completely react to you differently with different subplots and different stories that open up for you."

"We've basically covered all the major fantasy archetypes," says Greig. "Each race has a classic, traditional origin story, and then we've got one that's a lot more edgy. We're finding in testing that the unusual ones are the ones that people like the most."

WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE

Behind every good hero stands his chums—and BioWare RPGs are nothing without followers. "Every character will have access to the full set of NPCs," says Greig. "They'll treat you differently depending on the origin story, and when you get them is dependent on origin story too." Characters follow behind you in Explore Mode, and BioWare is strongly pushing the idea of party banter. Greig compares it to *Saving Private Ryan*: "There's a part [in

• **Customization is king, even for NPCs. "In sci-fi," says Greig, "you can put a stormtrooper helmet on everyone and it looks great. In fantasy, you need uniqueness to pull it off."**



"MULTIPLAYER POSSIBILITIES? THERE ARE ALWAYS POSSIBILITIES."

–GREG ZESCHUH, COFOUNDER, BIOWARE

• **Tailor-made terror: Each character's origin story comes with its own unique arch-nemesis.**

SPR) when they're just walking though the area not doing anything, but the banter going on really brings them to life. We're trying to capture that."

As for A.I., "It's not just me and three meat Popsicles," Greig continues. "These are living, breathing characters...all the NPCs that join you have different agendas. If you say, 'I'll side with this faction,' that'll obviously please some of your party members, but others will say, 'I can't believe you just did that.'" Morally driven banter is one thing (party members in *Knights of the Old Republic* would often chide you for your dark-side decisions while blindly following your innocent-slaughtering orders) but morally driven behavior is another—and Greig hints that NPCs might even go so far as refuse to fight if they feel you're way out of line.

NPC management is similar to that of *KOTOR 2*; every major area you enter has a "base camp" with activities that change depending on location, and selecting the appropriate NPC for the location will be important. "When you go into the city, it's probably not the best idea to bring the 9-foot-tall war golem with you," says Greig, pointing to a character modeler's monitor where a large rock creature is on display—an imposing, rune-covered "dwarven war golem" named Shale. "This is one of the NPCs that joins you.... The dwarves used to make these guys for their wars, but the art of creating them has been lost. But you run into one of these guys and he gets to join up with the party—and as the prime mover of the world, you have influence over how this guy turns out. You can explore his past and get into the details to make him a living, breathing person—as far as dwarven war golems go—or you can turn him into a blind follower who'll basically kill at your every whim." A *Dragon Age* analogue to *Knights of the Old Republic*'s space-age HK-47, it seems. "You'll also be able to upgrade him—carve new dwarven runes into him to gain new powers. You'll be able to customize every one of the party members in some way."

Down the hall, Greig shows off a "visual fidelity" test—an impressive blue-tinged torture chamber where stained glass windows pour colored light on the wall and sunlight flickers on the floor in distorted waves.

"The art philosophy is 'fantasy painting come to life,'" says Greig, invoking Frazetta once again. "It's dark. It's gritty...it's all about dirt and texture detail." Over by the in-game wall, he points out "the best barrels you'll >

see in a videogame...running on a high-end PC, you'll see the level of detail...[we're definitely thinking about] DirectX 10 and beyond."

A giant disfigured blue demon plays bouncer at the door. "The artists went a little bit overboard with him," says Greig. "You can actually see a reflection of the room in his eyes. They also actually went down and did scrollwork on the [treasure] chests," he says, zooming in ultra-close to reveal detailed elvish runes on thin strips of metal. "One of the reasons for this test was to figure out how much is *too* much."

But when it comes to character close-ups and conversation, detail can make or break the deal. "There are two ways to go in the game industry for cinematics," says Steve Gilmour, director of animation and cinematics. "You go can go the sizzle, prerendered cinematic route, but because we're a story-driven game company, and because we allow you to build characters however you want them to be dressed and with whatever weapon that you've given them, we focus on in-game cinematics." Even now, in-game cinematics often means blocky figures with triangular mouths and cut-rate lip-synching—but BioWare is way ahead of the curve when it comes to crafting convincing digital actors.

Dragon Age uses a modified version of the *Mass Effect* conversation system, much lauded at last year's E3, in which characters' facial expressions speak at least a hundred words, lips synch convincingly to speech, and dialogue trees are distilled into bullet-point "ideas" and "tones" rather than complete sentences to make conversations flow at a more natural pace. "Ours is customized to do just what we need it to do," says Greig, "and we've got some ideas on how to make it *Dragon Age*-specific and work for the mouse and PC. The writing in a fantasy game is different from [that in] science fiction. In *Mass Effect*, they're going for a *24*-ish, modern type of dialogue. The language is much richer in texture in a fantasy game. The voice actors are going to be busy, that's for sure.

"Back in *Baldur's Gate*, if a character needed to be angry, the writers had to write angry words. Then we got to voice acting, and so the words themselves didn't have to be angry; you could just have the actors read in an angry voice. Now we actually have a lot more options—you can say an angry word, you can have an angry voice, or you can have the character just sitting there glowering."

"A level of storytelling fidelity with digital actors that we've never really had before," says Gilmour. "That's what I'd say 'next generation' really is."

CRITICAL HITS

BioWare tends to roll 20s. "We've had the opportunity to work with some of the best licenses, IPs, and world settings," says Greig. "We worked with *D&D*, *Star Wars*...and those have been great. The license holders have been good about letting us create stuff in their worlds. But no matter what you do, someone else actually owns it, and you have to respect their wishes and desires. And we'd come up with killer ideas that just didn't fit into those world settings. If you're building your own, it gives you a chance to explore those themes.

"There's been a great tradition of *D&D*; a lot of our fans grew up playing it, [and] we've grown up using it, but we wanted to do something more in line with a modern audience...like the old *Battlestar Galactica* series compared to the new one—how they've taken the same themes, characters, setting, and brought it to modern sensibilities."

For Greig, that's something worth bleeding for.

RATHER THAN JUST OFFER MULTIPLE ENDINGS, *DRAGON AGE* OFFERS MULTIPLE BEGINNINGS.

Shale the war golem: one of the NPCs you get to mold and abuse in *Dragon Age*.

The RX

INTERVIEW

Dr. Raymond Muzyka and Dr. Gregory Zeschuk have an alphabet of letters following their names (BMSc, CCFP, MBA, and of course, MD) and no less than three titles each for both BioWare and BioWare/Pandemic. By all rights, the good doctors could have big cars and cavernous corner offices with the attitudes to match. But they don't. They are the creators of some of the most memorable role-playing games of all time, and yet they slip on ID lanyards and wedge into shared offices just like everyone else. To the BioWare employees, they are just "Ray and Greg." How do they feel about returning to the PC to make a Windows-only RPG?

GFW: *Dragon Age* is your first *Dungeons & Dragons*–ish fantasy IP without the *D&D* license. How does it feel going back to that after all these years—and going back to making a PC-specific game, for that matter?

Ray Muzyka: The PC community has always been very important to us. The PC is one of our favorite platforms and we're going to continue making games for it as long as there are PCs to play them. As for making a fantasy RPG, many folks in the community have wanted to see us make another epic fantasy game....

Greg Zeschuk: Dark heroic fantasy we're calling it. We're pulling together the best of the fantasy genre that we've seen in the past 10 years. There are always the classics, but *The Lord of the Rings* movies, visually and story-wise, tell us a lot, and we think George R.R. Martin's books show that it's not just for kids—that there can be serious and mature stories as well. I think that the fantasy genre has just become "cool" again—not that we ever left it.

GFW: You were still making mods for *Neverwinter Nights*....

GZ: Yep, and we had *Dragon Age* in our road map for quite a while.

GFW: With your past few games—*Knights of the Old Republic*, *Jade Empire*, and now *Mass Effect*—releasing first for the Xbox or 360, did the PC community give you any flak?

RM: Not really. I think people know and trust that BioWare is going to continue to support Windows. And we are. In the case of *Jade Empire* we're actually adding content to it, making it better and learning from what we did on the Xbox. We're balancing the combat, making numerous tweaks and, of course, improving the graphics. Players get an experience improved from the original game.

GFW: What do you perceive as the difference between a console RPG and a PC one?

RM: We look for the best in breed for all platforms. We see exciting things on console that you can bring to PC and vice versa. From our perspective, a great game is a great game. We have a few pillars that need to be in every BioWare game in order for it to be successful. It's gotta have great story and characters, great exploration, progression, customization, conflict, and tie all those things together. The methods employed may differ between platforms, but in many ways, the best games on both platforms are very similar. A lot of it is the interface and how the player is interacting with the game—whether sitting on the couch or leaning forward in front

> "WE THINK THAT GEORGE R. R. MARTIN'S BOOKS SHOW THAT IT'S NOT JUST FOR KIDS. THE FANTASY GENRE HAS JUST BECOME 'COOL' AGAIN."
>
> –GREG ZESCHUK, COFOUNDER, BIOWARE

MASSIVELY AMBITIOUS

BioWare Austin tries to put the RPG back in MMORPG

In March, BioWare announced its new Austin studio was working on a massively multiplayer role-playing game. Details are still top secret—but the team was willing to sit down with us and talk philosophy.

On BioWare: "We want to bring what BioWare's famous for to the online space. And BioWare is famous for its storytelling."—*James Ohlen, creative director*

On impacting the world: "You can't have a story that involves saving the world from the dark lord Sauron—not that we're making a *LOTR* game—but you can do a lot of things that are personal to your character."—*JO*

On quests: "We don't want NPC Rez dispensers. We want to make sure you listen to NPCs, because choices matter."—*Rich Vogel, co-studio director*

On repetition: "The grind is not attractive. Killing the same dragon over and over again is not something I want to do. Putting more weight on storytelling experience points is a good way to fix that. Make sure your story is good, the presentation is exciting, and the player has motivation to move forward in his personal story."—*JO*

On classes: "It's important to have roles. If you understand your role in the world, and others understand your role, you get group dynamics and social behavior."—*RV*

On the endgame: "We don't want players to be stuck grinding through the same content over and over again. I know when I hit level 60 in *WOW*, I pretty much quit. So whatever endgame model we have, it's not going to be that"—*JO*

On *World of WarCraft*: "We're not looking to kill *WOW*. It's not a zero-sum game out there."—*Gordon Walton, co-studio director*

On player-created content: "If we're going to create immersive, epic stories that are believable, that really goes against having a simulation-type world. Those two things don't go together well."—*JO*

On writing: "We want to create more story content than in any other BioWare game before. The world is huge and has tons of paths. We started a writing team earlier than in any other BioWare project; we're going to have nine writers total."—*JO*

On when: "Anything worth doing well is worth taking the time. Everyone who's tried to cram [an MMO] into a ship date has had issues. Been there and done that a couple times."—*GW*

On long-term goals: "I just want to be on *South Park*."—*RV*

BioWare's founders find the cure for the common role-playing game

for RPGs

of a keyboard—but the emotions we want the player to feel are the same.

GZ: We want to drive the depth of our games more in both emotion and customization. When we look back at what we did, *Dragon Age* is very much the spiritual successor to the *Baldur's Gate* series with a dash of *Neverwinter Nights* tossed in. It wasn't hard to get started, but man, you could go deep in those games. I think that's what we try to capture on a variety of platforms, no matter what we're making.

RM: You've got to appeal to different audiences on both platforms. Some want an easier, more accessible experience, maybe play a half an hour a night, while others will think nothing of sitting down for 100 hours to really explore. Regardless of the system, we have to appeal to different types of players and make everyone feel like they are getting their money's worth. That's their choice. It's their game. For the hardcore BioWare game players, there is always going to be a deep, rich story and a huge open world to explore. We're going to continue to push emergent behavior, party combat, and customization in new ways. And we're always going to try and learn from things that work—and don't work as well.

GFW: Such as?

RM: We want to add even more depth for longer games that can inspire players. With *Neverwinter Nights* we learned how to do modules and postrelease content. With *Jade Empire* we learned how to combine everything into a polished experience and now we're exploring how to take that polished experience and add more breadth to it—exactly what we're hoping to do with *Dragon Age*.

GFW: Does that mean *Dragon Age* will use modules and be open for fan-made content?

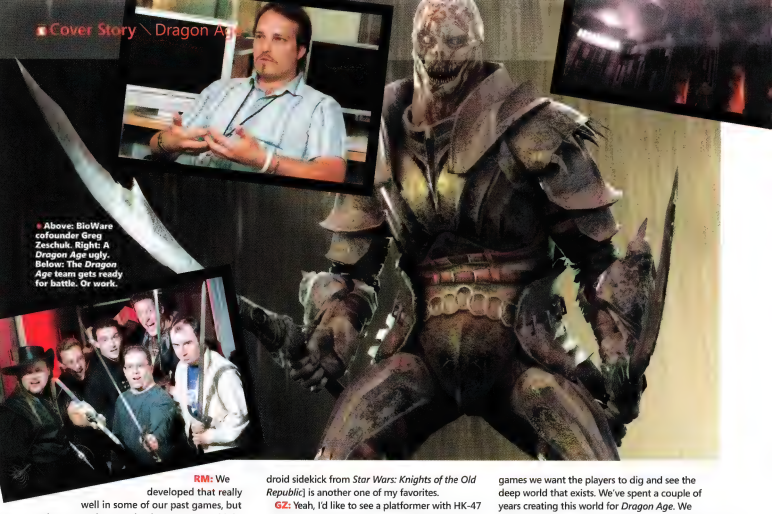
GZ: We're still nailing down the exact details of how that is going to work, but there's definitely going to be some kind of customization. You make these tools where thousands of people make modules, but at the end of the day, the number of modules that are actually *good* is pretty finite. What you want to do is find a nice balance between making tools that some folks use, but not [making] an everyman's tool. That said, that part is still being worked out.

RM: We're definitely committed to the idea of postrelease content, though. We want to continue to support our fans online and provide an ongoing experience for all our games.

GFW: You said that one of your pillars of gameplay is customization. How is that evolving with *Dragon Age* and beyond?

GZ: With every new game, another wave of technology happens. What we sat down and thought about with *Dragon Age* is the fun of mixing and matching your armor. Y'know, *seeing* it all. The customization is core to how we design our characters—and not just the player character, but the NPCs as well. *Dragon Age* is a party-based game, after all. It's not just you. How you choose to use them is part of the fun.

GFW: What are you doing to explore karma this time—"light-" and "dark-side" choices? >



Above: BioWare cofounder Greg Zeschuk. Right: A *Dragon Age* ugly. Below: The *Dragon Age* team gets ready for battle. Or work.

RM: We developed that really well in some of our past games, but we're now trying to take that to an even higher level. The personal choices you make need to have momentous impact in the overall world. One of themes we're using in *Dragon Age* is that "History is written in blood." Your choices really make a big difference in how the world unfolds. Who you bring with you will be a different experience on the micro level in battle and also the game's outcome.

GFW: As long as we can bring along someone like Minsc [from *Baldur's Gate*].

GZ: [*Laughs*] A different universe, but maybe one day. That's actually one of the fun things of doing these games. Each time we go out and make a new set of characters and you never know who is going to catch on.

GFW: You've created an interesting roster of characters over the years. Who are some of your favorites?

RM: Minsc is one. Minsc and his pet miniature giant space hamster, Boo. HK-47 [the homicidal droid sidekick from *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*] is another one of my favorites.

GZ: Yeah, I'd like to see a platformer with HK-47 [*Holds up hands, mimicking a robot jumping, points and says in a monotone voice*], "Take that, meatbag."

RM: [*Laughs*] What's fun is seeing players explore the rich world that we created. *Jade Empire* has this story and the more time you spend with NPCs, the more you learn about them and the world. You can get extra quests and other things get unlocked as a result.

GZ: In *Jade Empire*, my favorite character is the Bunmaster. You really can't go wrong with him. Henpecked Hou is another. He was hilarious. There's this interesting story if you pursue any of these guys. Everyone has favorites, though. Apparently, Carth [of *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*] was a hit with the female gamers. There's a lot of fan fiction dedicated to him.

GFW: Uh-oh. But you build enough detailed backgrounds so that people can do that.

RM: Let's just say we've got great writers here and that is one of our core focuses. With our games we want the players to dig and see the deep world that exists. We've spent a couple of years creating this world for *Dragon Age*. We brought in a linguist to create languages used in this world, even though you only see them for small periods. If you make everything consistent and true, the player feels it.

GZ: When we started on *Jade Empire*, we created this hardcover sourcebook for everything. We had this huge thing detailing every bit of the world and only used a small slice for the game.

RM: If you can have any game with that layer of detail and you just keep going down more levels, it's awesome. It's a living, breathing world. That's what we try to create.

GZ: With *Dragon Age*, we prototyped the story first. We actually had done a lot of the story even before focusing on the game. Too many games have a technology, build a couple levels, and then say, "Hey, let's make a story that fits here." For us, we do it the other way around.

RM: Our artists do concepting while our writers use one of our older engines to build up the game story, and then it all comes together.

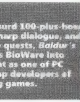
"IN MANY GAMES, THAT'S ALL THERE IS—THE FEAR. WE ALWAYS STRIVE FOR ALL THE OTHER EMOTIONS THAT CREATE POWERFUL TIES BETWEEN THE PLAYER AND THE GAME."

–RAY MUZYKA COFOUNDER, BIOWARE

1995
Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk create their first game, the *Gastroenterology Patient Simulator*, while still medical students at the University of Alberta. You don't want to know what the cheat codes are.

1996
On their first press tour promoting the mech war game *Shattered Steel*, Ray and Greg wear "Nerd Power" T-shirts and meet with "power brokers" like their *Computer Gaming World* editor Jeff Green.

1998
With its absurd 100-plus-hour playtime, sharp dialogue, and tons of side quests, *Baldur's Gate* throws BioWare into the spotlight as one of PC gaming's top developers of role-playing games.



JADE EMPIRE SPECIAL EDITION

BioWare's Xbox action-RPG finds inner PC

We liked *Jade Empire* for Xbox well enough—really, we did—but two things Eagle Dowed and Drunken Monkey Fisted the experience to death: One, the game pushed the poor console just a wee bit too far, and the framerate was, to put it nicely, inconsistent. Two, the game's infamously long load times disrupted our chi—and made us give up our quest long before reaching enlightenment.

A wise man—or maybe a fortune cookie—once said: Fate rewards the patient. And *Jade Empire* has journeyed across vast planes of harmony to arrive on the endless sea of Windows XP True to their word, BioWare has buffed up *Empire* with new stuff that didn't make the Xbox version:

Shout at the devils. New demons torture you, including a rhino-headed monster and a Cthulhian tentacle thing. No, those aren't the official names.

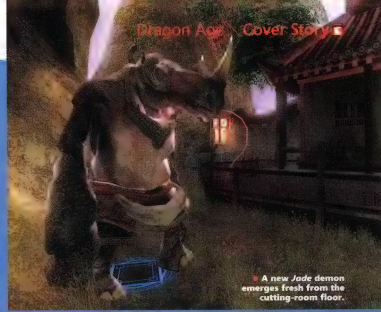
The karate, kid. Two new fighting styles arrive, including the sumo-based Iron Palm and the Viper Style, which was inspired by the classic kung fu flick *Five Deadly Venoms*.

The art of war. Victory isn't given; it's earned—and thanks to a smarter A.I., you'll be challenged for every inch. Foes will be more elusive and a new difficulty mode will tax these finely honed martial arts skills.

Enter the dragon. Monk Zeng, the special Xbox Limited Edition–only character, comes along for the ride. It's a good thing. He's our favorite.

We had a chance to play a late preview build of *Jade Empire*, and the game's Xbox ancestry is obvious. Yeah, it's two years old and looking a little rickety—even with increased screen resolutions—but good BioWare titles tend to transcend time.

Keyboard controls seemed intelligent enough, especially considering the action-heavy tactics in *Jade Empire*, but the only thing that really "left" off when playing was the camera control. You can now play from a first-person view, but only when not in combat—and the third-person camera feels annoyingly limited by today's PC standards. Worse, we still play the game and get past the infamous Arena area now that we don't have to suffer through painfully long load times? Absolutely. And if you've never tried the original Xbox version, there's really no excuse.



A new *Jade* demon emerges fresh from the cutting-room floor.

GFW: Surely there's a lot of story tweaking after that initial part as well?

RM: Continually. We spend a lot of time on final polish. Our people are so passionate about making a great game and everyone here spends a lot of time caring about that quality. Even beyond the prototyping and design phases, even when we're pretty much done, we spend extra time tweaking things to try and take games from "good" to "great."

GZ: When it comes to world building, there aren't that many people left doing that level of craft. The way that the industry has gone with licensing IPs, it's something that the developers get free with the license.

RM: Really, that's what a license is all about, permission to use a rich body of work that people already know.

GFW: A lot of your success stems from licenses—*D&D* and *Star Wars*. Now, you're off creating your own world…

GZ: We're having a lot of fun building the world of *Dragon Age*, but we also want to go in a different direction. One of the earliest discussions we had was, "What kind of world do we want?" That's where this darker fantasy is coming from.

RM: It's a fusion of common themes. You're a knight in shining armor, a darker knight, but you can continually feel this sinister element in the background. There's tension, something oppressive, but an aspiration to rise above it. A feeling like it's fantasy, but it can also be real. Like our other games, we're trying to build a bond between the players and the world.

GZ: It's like the follower stories in *Jade Empire*. Many people never found them, but it's really worth it because these are some of the best parts of *Jade Empire*. If you spend the time to talk to people, you unlock completely new areas. We want you to believe that the world is real, that the NPCs are real people you can connect with.

GFW: When it comes to emotion, why do so many other developers rely on only fear?

RM: In many games, that's all there is—the fear. We always strive for all the other emotions that create powerful ties between the player and the game. I think it's incredibly important to be able to make an emotional attachment with characters—whether it's in a movie, book, or game. The best games are the ones that send a chill down your spine.

GFW: *KOTOR* was a poster child for that.

RM: Exactly. Those 30 seconds at the end of the game—even though I knew what was coming—sent a chill down my spine. We knew we had created something special. That's the moment you remember later.

GZ: There are certain things you remember even 10 years later. I was just at Microsoft's X06 event and I was talking to someone about *Baldur's Gate II*. "I couldn't believe it when Yoshimo betrayed me," he said. That's a few years ago, but he was still thinking about it. That is one of the amazing things about games that trumps all other forms of entertainment—it's experiential. When you make a choice and an emotionally charged event occurs, you're a part of it. That's what we're going for in our games. You do something selfless and sacrifice yourself or do something dastardly and watch what results from your actions. I still remember feeling a little strange the first time I did something dark in *KOTOR*.

GFW: You're experimenting with a new dialogue system for the upcoming Xbox 360 game *Mass Effect*. Is that going to carry over into other games as well?

RM: We always try to take what works in one game and implement it in others. We actually have a low turnover rate here. There are a lot of shared ideas and technologies on projects. It's a fertile cross-pollination between all the projects, so if it turns out that the conversation system in *Mass Effect* really resonates with the fans, we will carry it forward.

GZ: *Jade Empire* and *KOTOR* set the stage for that with digital actors and cinematic storytelling, but you can always trace it back further. Back in *Baldur's Gate* we had pixelated characters and a whole two lines of voiceover. That was crazy stuff back then. Technology has come a long way. We can put so much up on the screen now with full voiceover, music, and high-resolution graphics, and we can cue up these powerful moments >

2000

***Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* ships, and 200 productive hours evaporate into the ether. The game's engine goes on to power other developers' classics like *Icewind Dale* and *Planescape: Torment*.**

2002

Catering to aspiring game developers and dungeon masters alike, *Neverwinter Nights* lets players create their own modules. It also opens the door to episodic module content for years to come.

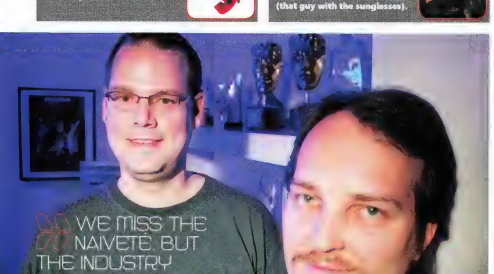
2003

***Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* sets new standards for RPGs—and twist endings. And, really, if you haven't played *KOTOR* yet, stop reading this article and just go play it already.**

2004
Anxious to share their latest PC game with editors, Greg and Ray unveil an extremely early first glimpse of *Dragon Age* during the Electronic Entertainment Expo. Those teases.

2005
BioWare forms an alliance with Pandemic Studios funded by Elevation Partners. Two notable members of Elevation: former president and COO of Electronic Arts John Riccitiello and Bono (that guy with the sunglasses).

2007
By the end of 2007, we expect to be playing *Dragon Age* (and maybe *Mass Effect* on the Xbox 360, for good measure).



where we can affect the player in a very personal and emotional way. We see that possibility on the horizon and getting closer with every game we make.

RM: It's funny. One of moments I remember vividly from playing games was back in *Wizardry*. You go down to the bottom of the dungeon and find Werdna. You'd hear these three beeps. That was it, just three beeps to let you know he was close. I still get creeped out when I think of that. It was a powerful moment for a 10-year-old.

GZ: You know, we have this arcade machine loaded up with all our old games on it. You can actually play *Baldur's Gate* with a trackball. It's interesting to see this cross section of all the games and you start seeing some of those storytelling traces.

RM: You just need a stool after a while.

GFW: That's probably not a very lucrative arcade. Unless you charge a quarter for every time you want to save. Still, looking back at all those games you've done…

GZ: Yeah, we were pretty naïve in the beginning. Around 1996, before anyone knew us, we started making these fake magazine covers with our game and us on it. We'd send them out to editors for PR…

RM: One of the graphic designers knew we loved cigars, so he put me on a fake cover of *Cigar Aficionado* magazine. [*Laughs*] We never sent it.

GFW: Any thoughts on how far the industry has come since you were on the cover of *Cigar Aficionado*?

GZ: Well, we miss the naïveté, but the industry has changed for the better. It's now something impactful and important. When we started, it was still this very nascent thing, but it's fun.

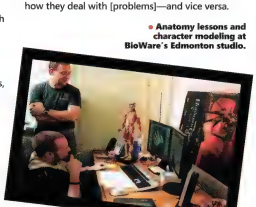
GFW: Now, after allying with Pandemic and Elevation Partners, you're an independent über-developer. How does that feel?

RM: Pandemic is a great studio, and we share the same values. They focus on more action-heavy open-world games while we are obviously big on roleplaying and story. We can learn a lot from each other.

GZ: It's a positive thing for us and, for a large part, the industry. It shows one of the potential routes you can go as a development studio. It's also great to have incredibly smart people to talk to and we're excited to see those first few joint games come out as partners.

RM: It's great to have a boss and mentors [at Elevation] that know the business, and great being able to turn to Pandemic when we're stuck to see how they deal with [problems]—and vice versa.

• Anatomy lessons and character modeling at BioWare's Edmonton studio.



WHAT'RE THE ODDS?

Jimmy the Geek's Vegas odds on BioWare's MMORPG.

Ay, so what if BioWare isn't ready to spill just where or when their MMO takes place (see "Massively Ambitious," pg. 77)? We've cooked up some betting lines for the mystery game that BioWare Austin is busy making.

2:1
Knights of the Old Republic Online
Star Wars Galaxies doesn't seem long for this universe, BioWare's an obvious choice to try it next. It almost makes too much sense.

5:1
Jade Empire Everywhere
Everybody loves a good kung fu game. *Jade Empire* was a hit on the Xbox, and there's still a ton of rich backstory left unexplored. Could be.

8:1
World of SomeOriginalFantasyThing
BioWare's big on doing their own thing these days ("original IPs," they call 'em), but *World of WarCraft* is the big dog. You don't pick fights with a big dog.

15:1
Massively Effected
The Xbox 360 game *Mass Effect* is getting a ton of buzz. *Battlestar Galactica* means sci-fi is hot, and the holy word "trilogy" hath been spoken… but nobody takes chances on the new kid (or in this case, new IP) these days.

10,000:1
Gastroenterology Patient Simulator Online
Dream on, doc! Good luck getting permission from cocreator Augustine Yip to resurrect this pre-Shattered Steel franchise. Scary thought, the idea of a massively multiplayer surgery.

GFW: And [U2 front man] Bono? He's a partner in Elevation. Is he a gamer as well?

GZ: He is, actually, and he has good comments for us on games.

GFW: Huh. So he's hands-on, then?

RM: For sure. He's an active partner in Elevation and takes part in all the meetings. Really, really smart. All six partners are incredibly smart. They're the kind of people that if you spend any time with you walk away learning something.

GZ: Bono's insights are spot-on. He'll look at an entertainment product or game and he'll say, "*That* is good. That part isn't and here's why." He's got unique insights, as do the other partners. Great, great mentors.

GFW: Does this mean he's singing the *Dragon Age* theme song?

GZ: [*Laughs*] We haven't worked up the nerve to ask him yet. •

XTRAS

Want more? Listen to Greg and Ray on our podcast, take a video tour of the BioWare offices, and read our full Q&A with BioWare Austin at GFW.1UP.com.

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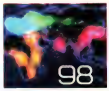
Reviews

Opinions you can trust

INSIDE

BUNNIES
Sam & Max: Culture Shock
Adventure gaming's comic duo returns!

GUNS
Company of Heroes
Real-time strategy game of the year?



A BOMBS
DEFCON
Time for some Global Thermonuclear War!

• **Our favorite crime-solving bunny and puppy come home in *Sam & Max: Culture Shock*.**

THIS MONTH IN REVIEWS...

Thirteen-plus years of formalized education tell us that a "C"—an average mark, by all accounts—translates to 70 percent...while anything sub-60 percent guarantees a big fat "F." Somewhere along the way, we ironically forgot that, according to basic math, the number smack dab in between 0 and 100 is 50. And unfortunately, we apply our distorted logic to a lot of other numbers—including review scores.

The problem with most scoring scales' implementations is that 90 percent of games wind up in the 7-to-9 range, with 7 signifying the average and everything below it acting as a poorly defined nebula for awful games. At *GFW*, we do not reward bad games with good scores. We mean what we say on that score key down there—5's the average, and you can trust that anything higher is a game worth playing.

Now that I've gotten that out of the way, allow me to welcome you to *GFW*'s Reviews section—get ready for the definitive word on some of the biggest releases leading up to this year's holiday season, from the industry's most authoritative game critics. And try not to get too upset about those "low" scores, OK? • **Ryan Scott, Reviews Editor**

SCORE KEY

GFW uses a 10 point scoring scale to inform you, at a glance, whether or not a game is worth your hard-earned money. We variably interpret a score of 5 as the median, meaning that any game receiving a score of 6 or above—average—and certainly worth your time, at least to some extent. Here's how the numbers break down:

Editors' Choice award
Any game scoring a 9 or higher receives a GFW Editors' Choice award, signifying the best bets in PC gaming.

10: Phenomenal. A hallmark for its genre.
9: Excellent. Triple-A—universally recommended.
8: Great. Admirable throughout, with some flaws.
7: Good. Highly enjoyable, if not noteworthy.
6: Above average. ...with some notable problems.
5: Average. Only game enthusiasts need apply.
4: Below average. Major flaws and missed opportunities.
3: Poor. Serious bugs or fundamental design issues.
2: Terrible. Never should have been made.
1: Abysmal. Absolutely broken and unplayable.
0: Insulting. An affront to the entire hobby.

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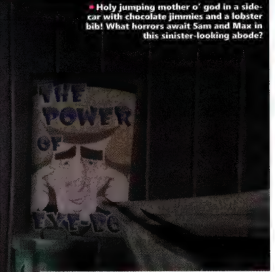
DISORDER
HOME
FOR FORMER
CHILD STARS
HOLE
ALLEY
OF
PERPETUAL
DARKNESS
HOME
OF
THE
STARS!
OTHER DOOR
TICKETS
THE GAME FEATURES SOME AMIABLE SATIRE.
ALBEIT OF A SORT SO TOOTHLESS IT MAKES
MAD MAGAZINE LOOK LIKE JONATHAN SWIFT.

Once you learn how the logic of Sam and Max's world works, none of the puzzles are all that tough.
CAN YOU BELIEVE WE GET PAID FOR THIS?

One particularly hilarious sequence involves Sam's psychiatric evaluation.

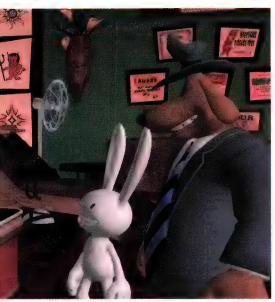
SAM & MAX: CULTURE SHOCK

So this dog and this rabbit walk into a therapist's office....



● **Holy jumping mother o' god in a side-car with chocolate jimmies and a lobster bib! What horrors await Sam and Max in this sinister-looking abode?**

● **Weird stuff aplenty resides in the duo's office.**



PUBLISHER **Telltale Games/GameTap** DEVELOPER **Telltale Games** GENRE **Adventure** AVAILABILITY **E-tail (www.gametap.com or www.telltalegames.com)** ESRB RATING **Not Rated** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS **800MHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 230MB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER **None** VERSION REVIEWED **Gold Master**

REVIEW

In some circles, the clamoring for a second *Sam & Max* game began about a day after the first *Sam & Max* game hit store shelves. Thirteen years and a few abortive stabs later, the classic LucasArts adventure game finally gets its sequel. Several sequels, actually. *Sam & Max Episode 1: Culture Shock* is just the first in a projected series of short adventure game "episodes" available for download at GameTap.com and developer Telltale Games' own site.

How exciting you'll find this new model depends largely on your appetite for adventure games: If you can't stand them, you won't like a short one a whole lot more than a long one. If you love them, you may find yourself feeling underfed when you crave a meal and are only served an amuse-bouche. But for those of you in the middle, the bite-size-installment approach might be just right.

MEET PEEPERS, WHIZZER, AND SPECS

The story, such as it is, involves the crime-fighting duo of Sam and Max (Sam's the dog, Max is the hyperactive rabbit) investigating a rash of vandalism committed by three former child TV stars. These kids—Peepers, Whizzer, and Specs—turn out to be under the control of another former child star, Brady Culture, who hypnotized them through his line of exercise videos. You have to break them free of his spell with the help of a paranoid convenience store owner and a psychotherapist who operates out of a tattoo parlor.

The plot's just a thin excuse for the jokes, of course—which come in a nonstop rat-a-tat stream of uneven style and quality, with lots of bad puns, goofy non sequiturs, sarcastic one-liners, and put-downs ("Your ideas are effervescent pustules, Max"). The game features some amiable satire, albeit of a sort so toothless it makes *MAD Magazine* look like Jonathan Swift. A reasonable fraction of the gags made me smile, but I only actually laughed a few times. The writers clearly were aiming for something as anarchic and witty as *The Simpsons* or the movie *Airplane!*...but their spaghetti-against-the-wall approach only sporadically achieves those rarefied heights. On the other hand, aside from some regrettable bladder-control jokes, it also rarely sinks to the level of the latest CGI talking-animal yukfest playing at your local Cineplex.

"2002 WAS A GREAT YEAR FOR CALENDARS."

The whole thing takes about four hours to play, with only five or six small locations to explore and a handful of simple puzzles to solve. None of this will win over anyone who doesn't already like adventure games, though. Too much of *Culture Shock* boils down to clicking on one object or dialogue choice after another and chuckling at whatever smartass thing Sam or Max says. Each little cartoon snippet you unlock is fun, but eventually you find yourself asking why you have to do so much work for them—it's like watching a cartoon on a DVD player powered by a hand crank.

Matters would be better if the writers had put a little more effort into ensuring that you wouldn't have to hear certain lines over and over. They could also have improved the mechanics of the game: The cursor moves sluggishly, making a few timing-based puzzles particularly annoying, and the characters sometimes inexplicably walk to places other than where you click.

But if you're willing to put up with all that, you'll find some real pleasures here: the sight gags tucked away in the corners of the screen; some bits of wordplay worthy of Abbott and Costello; the Brooklyn inflections David Nowlin (Sam) and Andrew Chaikin (Max) bring to their roles (Sam sounds like Don Adams from *Get Smart!* and Max sounds like Billy Crystal from *Monsters, Inc.*). Yes, too many of the jokes fall flat...and yes, you'll be tempted to give up on the game the tenth time you try to shoot out a van's tires with an unresponsive mouse or the 20th time you hear screechy-voiced Whizzer yammering on about "Brady Culture's Eye-Bo videos," but what the hell—we don't expect TV shows to hit their stride by the end of the pilot. The *Sam & Max* developers apparently have a full season in store for us—who knows, maybe they'll figure out how to pull a hit out of material that, for now, is a bit hit-or-miss. ● **Charles Ardai**

VERDICT

- **Welcome return of the sarcastic duo of gaming legend; a few good puzzles.**
- **This time around, it's more a cartoon you watch than a game you play.**

7/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

PUBLISHER Namco Bandai DEVELOPER InterServ GENRE Action-RPG AVAILABILITY Retail Box, E-tail (www.direct2drive.com) ESRB RATING Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS 1.8GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER 2-5 players VERSION REVIEWED Retail Box

REVIEW

It'd be easy to dismiss *Mage Knight: Apocalypse* as just another *Diablo* clone—that's game-review shorthand for "action-role-playing game with five characters, three branching skill trees, and lots of loot with names like 'Demon-Spackled Faceplate of the Earthen Agility Ox'"—but it owes just as much to MMORPGs as it does that click-and-slash archetype. Concepts of crowd control and "aggro" management play big roles here, and most encounters come in what MMOers so eloquently call "pulls"—fear the orc, confuse the minotaur, off-tank the ice monster. To drive the point home, quest-bearing NPCs have big golden exclamation points floating over their heads.

OK, fine—so it's *Guild Wars* or *World of WarCraft* or whatever for introverts...but aren't MMO-style play mechanics more a function of socialization and network constraints than superior game design? Shouldn't positioning and timing matter more—especially given *Mage Knight*'s rather hardcore heritage as a *HeroClix*-style miniatures game?

ARTIFICIAL STUPIDITY

But grand questions of game philosophy are moot when a game doesn't even do *WOW* all that well. You start off solo, choosing from one of five characters—a magey dragon, hot-lady necromantic assassin vampire, and so on—though the four fine folks you *didn't* choose eventually join you as A.I. allies when you reach their hometown to take on the native nemesis for the local MacGuffin in *Mage Knight*'s 98-percent-linear story. (Side quests? What're those?). The allied NPC A.I. is sad; animate a corpse to play off-tank, and half the time it just stands there like, well...a corpse.

Character development works on the "as you go" system, so if you find yourself pressing the fireball key a lot, your skills will naturally improve faster in areas friendly to the art of fireball-throwing. The skill trees contain some fun stuff, but the hang-up comes in the hotkeys—for reasons unknown, you can only bind certain skill keys to one particular half of the hot bar; in order to unlock a new skill in a tree you need to "level up" the skill immediately preceding it, which often means totally ditching an old-but-useful skill for a new-but-lame skill simply because the former no longer yields XP. The interface is full of more unsettling quirks: You can't slide your inventory sack (obnoxiously stuffed full every five minutes) around the screen. If you set the minimap to rotate based on which way you're facing, the map spins, but not the N-S-W-E compass marks—yes, the options menu grants you the power to shift the world's magnetic poles.

Item customization is a saving grace, as you can BeDazzle nearly every weapon or piece of armor with colorful stat-shifting mage stones—fun stuff—and the graphics feature neat spell effects and lots of lovely costume changes. The game's really frakkin' easy (death's merciful, and money's *everywhere*), so replay comes in the form of online multiplayer, where you can bring your character into any chapter or mission of the game to relive your greatest critical hits with some friends. But really, if you get to that point—why not just play *Guild Wars* instead? **Sean Molloy**

If you die and warp back to a checkpoint crystal, fallen foes don't respawn. Victory is inevitable!

VERDICT

5/10 AVERAGE

More to battles than just mindless button mashing; lots of custom item options.

Kludgy hotkeys; feeble allied A.I.; extremely linear progression.

Games for Windows

> THE OPTIONS MENU GRANTS YOU THE POWER TO SHIFT THE WORLD'S MAGNETIC POLES.

CAESAR IV

The fall of Rome?

• Though not immediately apparent here, my religious adviser's accusing me of being a godless heathen.

PUBLISHER: **Vivendi Games** DEVELOPER: **Tilted Mill** GENRE: **City Simulator** AVAILABILITY: **Retail Box** ESRB RATINGS: **Everyone 10+**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.6GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 2GB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Gold Master**

The Expansion of the Republic
The days of Roman kings are over, but Rome's greatness continues as the Republic extends her reach to distant lands.
The Republic continues to solidify its hold over both the East and the West.
Emerita Augusta:
Crush the last v
Start
Quit
Emerita Augusta
Narona

• **Though the city-building aspects shine, *Caesar IV*'s real-time-strategy gameplay leaves much to be desired.**

REVIEW

City-building simulators always seem doomed to the ubiquitous "it ain't *SimCity*" criticism...and in most cases, it's a sadly valid argument. Take, for example, *Caesar IV*. The latest game in the *Caesar* franchise—manned by the Impressions Games castoffs at Tilted Mill Entertainment—tries hard...and, if not for numerous technical atrocities and an unfortunate case of identity crisis, its efforts just might've paid off.

As the title suggests, *Caesar IV* puts you in the seat of a Roman governor, duty-bound to ensure Ancient Rome's expansion and prosperity. The game starts out with some introductory scenarios that run you through the motions of providing your demanding populace with a satisfactory existence. Housing attracts more citizens (from lowly plebs to hoity-toity nobles); factories and fields keep them busy; markets keep them well-fed; and other public services like prefect offices, clinics, and coliseums keep them safe and happy. Trade routes give you access to the luxuries necessary to court the elite (and taxpaying) citizenry, and provided you can keep up with the continual balancing act, the game's intricate economy makes for a pretty rewarding game experience.

And when you do run into (or want to avoid) trouble, your cadre of droll (and perpetually discontented) advisors begrudgingly alerts you to civic problems and keeps you appraised of Rome's opinions on your handiwork (just make sure you keep the home city's coffers filled with money and material objects). Your own performance gets rated in five categories from culture to security. Once you learn the ins and outs, it's off to the big leagues in two lengthy campaigns across the Roman Empire.

> YOUR CADRE OF DROLL ADVISORS BEGRUDGINGLY ALERTS YOU TO CIVIC PROBLEMS.

CITY UNDER SIEGE

It's at this point that the aforementioned identity crisis sets in. For each campaign scenario, you can freely choose between an idyllic trade-focused path and a more dangerous militaristic route. The former sticks closely to the rigors of city management, while the latter marks *Caesar IV*'s attempt to masquerade as a real-time strategy game. In theory, the freedom of choice presents a nice touch—but the entire pseudo-RTS arm of the game feels like it doesn't quite belong. Unit A.I. and controls don't match the complexity of a real RTS, and you can often win simply by maintaining a larger army than your aggressor. And if this type of gameplay does appeal to you, why would you turn to *Caesar IV* for it, anyway?

But even if the combat-shy player chooses to ignore the faux-RTS portions, plenty of other fundamental flaws loom large. Case in point: the interface, which—for no good reason—gobbles up roughly half the screen. The clunky menu system forces you to navigate through multiple layers of building options, and the game's puzzling lack of hotkeys means there's no way around it. *Caesar IV* also tends to choke up on midrange systems, and—perhaps the most egregious tech flaw of all—proves highly prone to crashes when you try to multitask. Rome's not burning to the ground just yet, but it definitely looks like someone lit the match. • **Ryan Scott**

VERDICT

Decent city-building game; a rich historical setting.

Out-of-place RTS gameplay; technical faults up the wazoo; an unnecessarily large interface.

5/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

COMPANY OF HEROES

Can you say "company of hallelujahs"?

PUBLISHER THQ DEVELOPER Relic Entertainment GENRE Real-Time Strategy ESRB RATING Retail Box AVAILABILITY Shelves
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS 2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 6.5GB hard drive space MULTIPLAYER 2-8 players VERSION REVIEWED Gold Master

REVIEW

The genius of *Company of Heroes* has nothing to do with its guts-and-flak atmosphere, its "Hell effin' yes, we earned that M rating!" audio, its uncluttered interface, or the way it parks your eyeballs in the beautiful mud and bellows, "Take that, *BrothersinMedalofDuty*!" That's just the gravy: Relic understands that Allied vs. Axis games—at their best—are really time machines that take us back to scooting G.I. Joe toys around our sandboxes (battlefields), through snarls of grass (barbed wire), and over "minefields" jury-rigged (unwisely) with bricks of Black Cat firecrackers.

Think of all the RTS games you've played over the years. How many made you hug cover? Leverage the slope of a hill? Drop sandbags to fortify turf? WWII's Western Front wasn't "Nazi Infantry Pits" or "Halls of Allied Warriors" grinding out peons in suicide waves; it was squads of men—aided by armor and artillery—scrabbling building to building and field by field with smoke canisters, grenades, and satchel charges. Better than anything else to date, *COH* captures those fundamental conceits—no throwaway flunkies, no frivolous maps, and no stupid mob rushing.

How Relic pulled it off is no great mystery, and you can spot the seeds in the company's earlier *Dawn of War*: hold-to-hoard resource nodes, capture/recapture strategic points you can build defenses on/around, and the simple "two-thirds majority wins" principle. Your basic goal is to rush the field with infantry; capture manpower, munitions, and fuel nodes; build defenses; then use armor to assault your opponent's strong points. The more nodes you control, the faster your resources tally...and the sooner you can build those lovely M26 Pershings or Flakpanzers.

The battlefields make *COH* exceptionally convincing, though; the messy tangles of gutted buildings and zigzag foliage lend each map an organic "war snapshot" look that perfectly dovetails with the tactics. Using a color-coded system of "dots" to gauge cover quality, you sneak small bands around hoping to bleed off resources fast enough to build your next wave of high-tech fortifications. A meta "tech tree" tallies battle points for purchasing doctrinal powers or calling down V-1 rockets. But forget ordering everything on the menu—*COH* pushes you into making tough choices and owning your tech track in battles. The best weapons, used traditionally (aim-and-shoot), can be overrun in seconds by wimpier but shrewdly played grunts.

In the end, the question you should ask yourself is: Do you play RTS games for the Lego bases and drone swarms? Or does the prospect of viscerally egging army men and tanks across gritty, complex battlefields sound more your style? If you're of the latter persuasion, *Company of Heroes* stands second to none. ● **Matt Peckham**

VERDICT

- **Rewards shrewd tactics; near-perfect unit/tech balance; exceptional single-player A.I.**
- **Performance-neuters high-end PCs.**

10/10
PHENOMENAL
Games for Windows

● **Can you hear that *Axis* soldier yelling "Wheeeeeeee"?**

> RELIC UNDERSTANDS THAT ALLIED VS. AXIS WORLD WAR II GAMES—AT THEIR BEST—ARE REALLY TIME MACHINES THAT TAKE US BACK TO SCOOTING G.I. JOE TOYS AROUND OUR SANDBOXES.

FACES OF WAR

Not just another pretty...aw, you know the rest

PUBLISHER Ubisoft DEVELOPER 1C/Best Way GENRE Real-Time Strategy AVAILABILITY Retail box, E-tail www.direct2drive.com RELEASE January
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS 2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 2.5GB hard drive space MULTIPLAYER 2-8 players VERSION REVIEWED Retail Box

REVIEW

A couple years back, Ukrainian developer Best Way put out a unique "action-RTS" called *Soldiers: Heroes of World War II*. While nobody could figure out why it wasn't just called "*Heroes of World War II*" (it's not like they needed to distinguish it from *Janitors: Heroes of World War II*), *Soldiers* surprised all comers by serving up gut-punch gameplay, sparkling screen decor, and impressive realism. But somehow, despite these strengths (and a good deal of critical acclaim), *Soldiers* didn't kill them at the local EB. Nevertheless, developer Best Way admirably decided to keep hope alive with *Soldiers* sequel *Faces of War*.

And we're glad it did. Sporting the same "direct control" feature that *Soldiers* used, *FOW* combines the large-context missions of an RTS with the infarction-inducing action of a third-person shooter. If you're not familiar: Direct control allows you to take control of any individual unit you own at any time. Rather than point, click, and let the A.I. engage the enemy, you can drive, aim, and shoot all by yourself via the mouse and keyboard. This element adds a welcome "captain" level of command engagement to a genre that usually keeps you at the "general" level.

THE OLD CURIOSITY

The majority of the missions (some based on historical situations) center on the final days of World War II, rather than run you through the rusty old El Alamein/Stalingrad/D-Day/Bastogne/Berlin gauntlet. You can play as the Reds, Tommies/Yanks, and—most interestingly—Nazis, each with in-depth, branching campaigns complete with bonus missions. Nearly all missions feature big, free-form maps (although scripted events sometimes annoyingly intrude on your freedom), where you command a small platoon against John Wayne–movie odds.

As with *Soldiers*, *FOW* features scads of true-to-life ordnance, including numerous highly realistic

The graphics engine is just as colorful (and even more powerful) than it was in *Soldiers*. Every building and vehicle you see here can be destroyed in any number of ways.

vehicles from all three factions, along with a complex-yet-straightforward control system. Translation: You get plenty of control options, but don't need to use them if they aren't your cup of ammo. The impressive A.I. does its best to mimic the behavior of real soldiers: If Jerry wings a grenade into your trench, the A.I. scrambles out of the way...and if you're wrangling a motorcycle through Nazi blockades à la *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, the A.I. watches your six.

HARD TIMES

Consider yourself warned, though—this is a game for *expert* RTS junkies only (partly because it's a genre hybrid, partly because it's just freakin' hard). The later maps require a bevy of multitasking, management, and planning skills along with top-drawer reflexes and titanium nerves. The brutal learning curve is exacerbated by the lack of sufficient hotkeys—a problem inherited from *Soldiers*—and the poorly translated vagaries of the mission briefings. Bottom line: If you want a quick wham-bam-thank-you-Wermacht, look elsewhere.

But for all its (relatively minor) quibbles, *Faces of War* does one thing unquestionably right: It delivers a solid, entertaining challenge. In particular, the game deserves kudos for including a robust, exciting co-op mode. You and your buddies must use ingenuity, reflexes, and teamwork to overcome impossible odds—and the cheer you'll rouse at mission's end makes these tactics well worth the effort.

● **Eric Neigher**

VERDICT

- **Unique action-oriented gameplay; smart A.I.; entertaining co-op.**
- **Laggy engine; insufficient hotkeys; frustratingly difficult for RTS newbies.**

8/10

GREAT

Games for Windows

FOR *EXPERT* RTS JUNKIES ONLY.

WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR—DARK CRUSADE

More skull-crushing time, boyz!

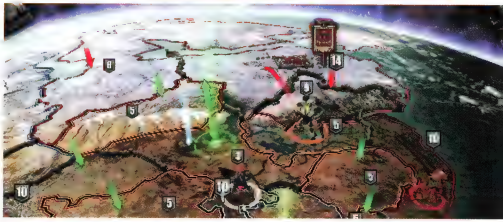
PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: Relic Entertainment GENRE: Real-Time Strategy WEBSITE: darkcrusade.thq.com RELEASE DATE: Out now
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2GHz Pentium 4, 512MB RAM, 4GB hard drive space MULTIPLAYER: 2–8 players VERSION REVIEWED: Gold Master

REVIEW

Whatever Relic Entertainment is smoking these days, they need to pass it around to the rest of the game industry—because these guys are on fire. With their awesome World War II real-time-strategy game *Company of Heroes* just barely out the door (and a huge, instant hit with PC gamers), Relic somehow managed to release a second expansion pack for their *other* outstanding RTS franchise, *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War*—and it's a great addition to the series.

Actually, "expansion pack" is something of a misnomer here, as you don't need the original game to play *Dark Crusade*...just one example of the generosity at work here. While most expansions are content to toss you a few new units and maps and call it a day, *Dark Crusade* is essentially an all-new game, with two new races (bringing the total up to seven) and a brand new single-player campaign. This gives the game across-the-board appeal: The new additions appeal to series vets, while newbies can jump in fresh and still get a full experience. Well, almost full; if you want to play as any of the five original races online, you need the original game and *Winter Assault* expansion.

The new single-player campaign eschews the original's and *Winter Assault*'s detailed story lines for a more straightforward just-beat-the-crap-out-of-everyone approach. And that, indeed, is the goal: to conquer the planet Kronus. You manage your efforts on a new world map in a *Risk*-style metagame between your real-time battles. You start off with your commander in one territory; each turn you can choose to attack a territory, move to an already conquered territory, and/or fortify your existing territories with additional troops. After you move, the other six races (all A.I.-controlled) do the same. If you get attacked, you can play out the battle yourself or let the game autoresolve it. The structure is cool, but doesn't match the complexity of games like the *Total War* series, where you spend as much time in the metagame as in real-time battle. *Dark Crusade*'s campaign is a comparatively low-rent affair, and frankly just feels like a way to lump a series of independent skirmish maps together.



The world map lets you plan your conquest, one territory at a time.

RUSH TO JUDGMENT

Unlike *Winter Assault*'s dull Imperial Guard, *Dark Crusade*'s two new races (the Tau and the Necrons) rock, and you don't have to be a *Warhammer* nerd (which I'm not) to appreciate them. I played the campaign as the Tau, who rely mostly on fantastically brutal ranged attacks, but it's the creepy Necrons who really force you into a totally different play style thanks to different unit-building requirements and an emphasis on infantry. One caveat with either race: Play through once on easy mode first, because on normal, the A.I. has an annoying habit of rushing right away, and if you don't have a grip on the new units, your ass will be handed to you—quickly.

Ironically, *Dark Crusade*'s biggest competition is *Company of Heroes*, which makes the *Dawn of War* series seem a half-generation behind in terms of graphics and gameplay. Those coming straight from *COH* might be a tad spoiled, and will long for features (like the Retreat button!) not present in *Dark Crusade*. Still, this is an outstanding RTS. It's a must-have for *Dawn of War* vets, and noobs who have skipped the series so far have a great excuse to check it out. ● **Jeff Green**

VERDICT

+ Generous, entertaining heap of new gameplay for an expansion.

+ More variety in maps would have been nice. It's not *Company of Heroes*.

8/10

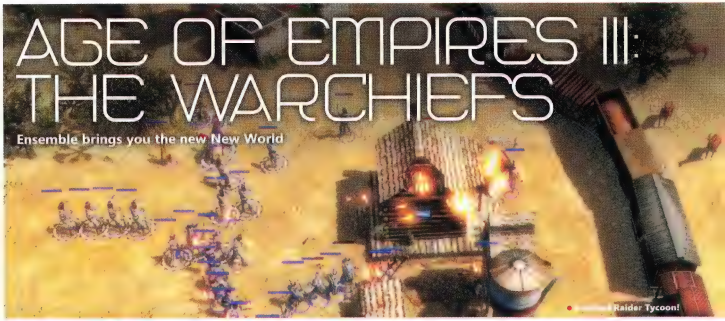
GREAT

Games for Windows

> WHATEVER RELIC IS SMOKING THESE DAYS, THEY NEED TO PASS IT AROUND TO THE REST OF THE GAME INDUSTRY.

AGE OF EMPIRES III: THE WARCHIEFS

Ensemble brings you the new New World



PUBLISHER: **Microsoft** DEVELOPER: **Ensemble Studios** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy** AVAILABILITY: **Retail Box** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.4GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2GB hard drive space, *Age of Empires III*** MULTIPLAYER: **2-8 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Gold Master**

REVIEW

EDITORS' CHOICE Games for Windows

Age of Empires III: Another of the series' trademark straight-up historical real-time strategy games. But now, with the *Age of Empires III: The WarChiefs* expansion, developer Ensemble reneges on its historical reverence by adding Native Americans—who recruit bears and jaguars, dance around a magical fire, and get mighty hero units. This pack even throws in more pirates and cowboys, and adds ninjas. No joke. Ninjas.

Luckily, Ensemble's at its best when it cuts loose. The team's crowning achievement remains *Age of Mythology*, a giddy mix of whimsical fantasy, reverent history, and a veteran developer's years of experience with RTS games. *WarChiefs* pulls *Age III* closer to *Age of Mythology* by making some bold choices for how the new Sioux, Iroquois, and Aztecs play...and discarding entire sets of rules in favor of new ones. It's a great move.

NOT YOUR FATHER'S *AGE III*

Remember forts? Don't need 'em. Cavalry? What's a horse? Have a little invisibility to help you raid villages. Stalemates got you down? Control more than half of the outposts on the map and declare a trade monopoly. You might have thought the Dutch and Ottomans in the original game broke the paradigm. Yeah, those were the days—when something as simple as villagers costing gold instead of food was considered wacky.

The Iroquois are the most conventional Native Americans, able to hit hard as they age up and discover gunpowder. You might remember their mantlets, ideal for killing buildings from behind big wooden shields. This time, the Iroquois bring along battering rams, too. Their insta-building travois give them a great deal of flexibility and unpredictability. The Sioux are excellent raiders—fast, elusive, and free of housing-imposed limits. Finally, the oddball Aztecs completely lack horses and gunpowder. Sure, you laugh now...but wait until you've got a dozen Skull Knights backed by a couple of Warrior Priests knocking at the doors of your town center.

YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION?

Plenty of other changes litter the game. The European civs get their share of tweaks, like Spies (great for killing Native American heroes and mercenaries) and a new, agile artillery piece. Everyone gets mercenaries at the saloon, and new cards pepper the Home City screens. But these are, mostly, the same Europeans you've played all along.

But then you get to the Fortress Age: Now you're faced with the dilemma of going industrial to continue your economy or declaring a revolution—which essentially breaks the game. It's the equivalent of knocking your pieces off the board and replacing them with battleships and machine guns and nothing but.

The revolution choice illustrates the real thrill here: discovering new ways to play a game you thought you knew. Your first reaction's probably "Wait a minute, so you're telling me the Sioux don't get any artillery? None at all? How in the name of Crazy Horse am I supposed to bring down a French fort?" This leads to discovering the power of a pack of villagers doing the torch dance at a fire pit—something to the tone of triple-plus damage against buildings. At this point, *WarChiefs* turns into an exciting exercise in completely rethinking old strategies. And this, after all, is what the best expansion packs do: not just add, but entirely revise. ● **Tom Chick**

VERDICT

- ***Age of Empires III* just got a little bit wackier.**
- ***Age of Empires III* just got a little bit wackier.**

9/10 EXCELLENT

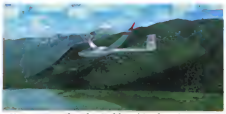
Games for Windows

• No, that's not a photograph—you're looking at an actual screenshot of the Air Creation 582SL ultralight buzzing hot air balloons to win a mission medal.

• Fly low to the ground and marvel at the amazing level of detail *Flight Sim X* hath wrought.

• Yes, in a select number of airports, you can actually taxi right up to the gate, which swings out to let passengers disembark.

• Ground and air traffic alike receive substantial visual updates, right down to the dingy colored boxes stacked atop this ship.



• You can see the physical bend in the wings as you torque up or down—in the case of the DG 808S Competition sailplane, it's enormous.

MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR X

AKA Microsoft "Kitchen Sink" Simulator

PUBLISHER: Microsoft DEVELOPER: Microsoft GENRE: Simulation RELEASED: Retail Box ESRB RATING: Everyone
MINIMUM REQUIRED: 1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 14GB hard drive space, DirectX 9 compatible video card with 64MB RAM
REVIEWED ON: 3.4 gHz CPU, 2GB RAM, 512MB Geforce 7900 GTX video card
MULTIPLAYER: 2-16 players
REVIEWED BY: Gord Mosier

Flight Sim X uses real-world digital elevation models to make mountains and valleys, and roads and rivers are placed using real-world vector data.

Even on the highest settings, you can still occasionally see a bit of ugly in the texture maps (stand by for modders to fix this up properly).

REVIEW

I once scared the hell out of my college roommate by popping the shell off our CompuAdd 386SX/16MHz desktop and adding some extra memory in hopes of running *Microsoft Flight Simulator 4.0* faster. It didn't help much, but my keg-muddled memories include flashes of Meigs Runway 36, a sky full of flat clouds, and the downtown Chicago skyscrapers—then primitive gray polygons—redrawing a bit more smoothly as I rapped the number pad (no joystick) and tried to tip my Cessna Skylane into the side of one especially big boxy rectangle (it was supposed to be the Sears Tower) for the heck of it.

Seventeen years and six versions later, *Flight Sim* returns with an "X" (like Apple's current OS, it's pronounced "ten") and hoo-boy, what a couple decades will buy you! Like its incremental predecessors, the latest incarnation soups up the visuals, tricks out the world with vehicles on roads and animals in the wild, adds a few dozen ultradetailed airports with baggage carts and fuel trucks, slips in a few new missions and aircraft, and broadens its online networking feature set. What's more, it's a topographical content leviathan, shipping on two (that's right, two) DVDs. You thought that 14GB hard drive install requirement was a joke?

PLEASE ME TEASE ME

If you already own *Flight Sim 2004*, what you probably want to know is, should you upgrade? That depends—are you the sort scanning www.faa.gov daily and building your very own ultralights from kits? Then you're a shoe-in unless I say something like "they dumbed down the flight models," which of course they haven't. So off with you, then—and be sure to pick up the $70 deluxe version, which includes 24 (versus 18) airplanes, 45 (versus 40) fully modeled airports, 38 (versus 28) realistically represented cities, 50-plus (versus 30) missions, and a special Tower Controller feature that lets you play air traffic guru with your friends online.

On the other hand, if you're an armchair aviator (which I'm guessing describes the majority audience), pick up the basic $50 version for one or both of the following reasons: to gobble up the basics of flight, from trim control to avionics; or—to heck with learning—you'd rather whip through the air and go "wow" a bunch while ogling the brand new scenery. Here's the trick, though…in order to enjoy the stunning new vistas, you need a ridiculously high-powered machine. Just ignore those silly system requirements up top; the recommended specs in our reviewer's guide were: a 3GHz processor, 2GB of RAM, and a 512MB videocard. Ouch.

So why not play on low settings, then? Because with the bells and whistles disabled, *Flight Sim X* looks just like *Flight Sim 2004*, which runs pretty darned well by comparison. Crank the detail to high, and yeah, it's a veritable photo shoot…but one that also runs like a photo *show*. I know you crusty diehards don't care about pulling a smooth 20-30 frames, but trust me: When you're trying to buzz low-ground pylons with the Extra 300 aerobatic plane or hit tricky target rings on moving boats with the new and incredibly cool Air Creation 582SL ultralight, it matters. Enough said, but to see all the pretty—and that's arguably the biggest "woohoo!" here—bank on next year's tech.

Or don't. You can certainly enjoy the other new features while you wait (say, if you want to go online with a pal and share control of the plane…or just offer your own personalized flying lessons). Missions are also better and more organic, broken into easy, intermediate, and advanced categories ranging from basic flying lessons (more engaging than Rod Machado's—which are still here, but forklifted in and a bit dated) to Red Bull racing sprints…and slow, thoughtful African safari hunts.

No, it's not the significant leap 2004's *Century of Flight* was, and performance—usually unworthy of mention—is the big sinker here. Otherwise, *Flight Sim X* is a solid, if not quite spectacular, 10th iteration. Here's hoping the inevitable *Flight Sim 11* offers the same visual breakthroughs without beating your PC to a quivering pulp. ● **Matt Peckham**

IT'S A TOPOGRAPHICAL CONTENT LEVIATHAN. SHIPPING ON TWO (THAT'S RIGHT, *TWO*) DVDS.

VERDICT

- **Tons of aviation-related tools; more of everything from the 2004 version.**
- **Turn up the detail and you need a PC that doesn't exist to run it.**

6/10

ABOVE AVG.

Games for Windows

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DEVELOPER: Introversion Software | PUBLISHER: Introversion Software | GENRE: Real-Time Strategy | WEBSITE: E-tail (www.everybody-dies.com) | RELEASE: Out Now
MINIMUM REQUIRED: 600MHz CPU, 128MB RAM, 60MB hard drive space | MULTIPLAYER: 2-6 players | DEMO AVAILABLE: E-tail Download

REVIEW

In Chris Crawford's 1985 geopolitical Cold War sim *Balance of Power*, if you—oops—triggered a nuclear war, the screen would go blank (pfip!) and whip out the wagging finger: "You have ignited a nuclear war. And no, there is no animated display or a mushroom cloud with parts of bodies flying through the air. We do not reward failure." As if body parts would "fly" in the wake of a 50 megaton yield (much less be a reward). Introversion's global thermonuclear war sim *DEFCON* (DEfense CONdition) is also 100 percent body-part free...and with a similar sense of cautionary dualism, it rewards you as much for preserving your own population as nuking the living snot out of the other side.

If you've seen the 1983 film *WarGames*, all I need say is "that scene at NORAD where the nutty computer wigs out," and "you essentially *play* that," and "yeah, it's the cat's pajamas," and we're done here. Go download it for $17.50. See ya online. Everyone else, buckle up: *DEFCON*'s a real-time strategy sim of global thermonuclear war for up to six players (A.I. or online), and—I said "buckle up," now—*it barely uses your 3D card* (I can't confirm it's even a requirement). Take *that*, all you "next-gen games need Hollywood budgets" bozos.

"IS IT A GAME...OR IS IT REAL?"

Load up and *DEFCON* automatically plugs your presence online (offline play is optional). Other players can jump in alongside A.I. bots—pick sides, ready-up, and the game begins. Your goal's simple: FUBAR the population centers and units of other countries for points while protecting your own. The player with the highest score when the timer expires "wins."

Matches transpire on a flat map of the globe, with the outlines of all six countries etched in colorful neon against sweeps of blue and black. The mouse handles everything (pan, zoom, select), but using the WASD keys for scrolling frees up your pointer for faster clicking. Played in real-time "stages," the clock ticks down from DEFCON 5 (the unit placement phase) to 1 (all-out war). You have nine types of land/sea units in quantities of less than a dozen each: radar dishes for intel; airbases for fighter surveillance and bombers; silos for air defense or launching nukes; and naval vessels ranging from battleships and carriers to subs. At DEFCON 4, radar kicks in, and from 3 through 2 you're hashing out land and sea battles. When you finally hit 1, it's "nuke 'em if ya got 'em" and launches—which begin as arcing missile salvos and culminate in blotchy white explosions—are broadcast globally to the gut-wrenching blare of Klaxons.

The reasons all this works: Each unit has a distinctive foil, every strategy can be trumped (no two matches play alike), all six countries have geopositional pros and cons, friendly backstabbing is nowhere else this joyous, and the entire system's rendered with the grace and simplicity of board games half as elaborate. Game of the year material? You decide, but *DEFCON* already has my vote. ● **Matt Peckham**

VERDICT

9/10 EXCELLENT

Games for Windows

- **Ridiculously cheap; deceptively simple; runs on almost any PC.**
- **Map can get pretty cluttered during frenzied activity periods.**

> THE ENTIRE SYSTEM'S RENDERED WITH THE GRACE AND SIMPLICITY OF BOARD GAMES HALF AS ELABORATE.

● **Losing (everybody loses, at least a little) involves lobbing big, tube-popping nukes. And hey—everybody loves nukes!**

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GTR 2

How real do you want it?

DEVELOPER: 2Pacific Studios GENRE: Simulation PUBLISHER: Kalypso RELEASED: Out now ESRB RATING: Everyone
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.3GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 2.5GB hard drive space, driving wheel (recommended) MULTIPLAYER: 2-24 players VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box

REVIEW

Last year's phenomenal *GTR* proved that someone still cares about hardcore road-racing sims...and in *GTR 2*, Swedish developer SimBin remains true to the high-end GT-sports-car racing formula and sophisticated real-world physics it so masterfully portrayed in the original, but adds more vehicles, more tracks, and perks that enhance an already first-rate experience. Moreover, SimBin manages to make the game newbie-accessible without compromising its ultra-authentic stance.

The game initially grabs you with its beautifully rendered car models and such wow-factor vehicle details as high-resolution cockpits, liveries, and wheels. It then takes you on an environmentally sensitive journey through no less than 34 authentically reproduced tracks and variant courses, where it soaks your windshield with incoming rooster tails when the weather is wet, forces you to endure the challenge of incrementally drying pavement, and serenades you with all the guttural roars and strained groans of a real cockpit. The dusk and dawn ambient and artificial lighting effects of a 24-hour race are particularly spectacular.

YOU DRIVE ME NERVOUS

But *GTR 2*'s strong suit is undoubtedly its realism. Whether you're out-braking your peers into a turn, impatiently waiting in the pit lane, selecting one of the 140 available cars (with 40 unique models among them), or hunkered down in the most comprehensive garage facility in recent memory, SimBin's knowledge of racing's subtleties remains obvious. The physics engine isn't altered appreciably, but it's nevertheless so good—and so reactive to issues like vehicle degradation and warming tires—that you can never relax. And if you crash, beware: GTR 2's damage modeling is substantially more "deconstructive" than its predecessor's.

Returnees and rookies benefit from *GTR 2*'s all-new Driving School, a practical hands-on tutorial comprising 20 general and track-specific lessons and over 100 "challenges." Moreover, by dropping the difficulty level and tweaking various settings in the game's deep, intuitive menu system, drivers of any ability can hop in and get a feel for the basics.

BREAK OUT THE POCKETBOOK

The downside to all this complexity: the demands *GTR 2* places upon your hardware. If you want smooth visuals, ignore the minimum requirements completely and look instead toward a 2.3GHz CPU and 256MB graphics card as a good starting point. Fortunately, the game still looks quite acceptable even when run with minimal detail. Ultimately, I'd consider *GTR 2* one of the finest examples of sim road racing—it's that good. ● **Gord Goble**

VERDICT

- **Sophisticated physics; tons of distinctive cars and tracks; superb presentation.**
- **Minimal car physics upgrades from *GTR*; the game is a resource hog.**

9/10
EXCELLENT
Games for Windows

ZERO TO 60

If you want to get serious about *GTR 2*, you need to drop any ideas of using a gamepad or (gasp!) keyboard. An accurate joystick such as CH Products' Flightstick Pro USB works far better, though the physical characteristics of any stick prohibit advanced driving techniques. Wheel/pedal sets are highly recommended, and one of the finest mass-produced (and affordable) systems is Logitech's MOMO Force. Set the gas and brake to separate axes in Windows' Control Panel, take full advantage of the game's Driving School component, judge your braking speed by the supermoto-esque turn markers, and remember that a calm, steady taste is a winning taste.

● **A.I. racers battle hard in every turn.**

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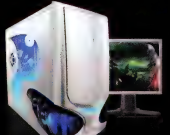

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NHL 07

Game misconduct

The Avalanche's perennial All-Star "Burnaby" Joe Sakic.

PUBLISHER: EA Sports DEVELOPER: EA Canada GENRE: Sports AVAILABILITY: Retail Box ESRB RATING: Everyone
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2.4GB hard drive space, gamepad (recommended) MULTIPLAYER: 2-4 players VERSION REVIEWED: Gold Master

Between-play animations are spectacular. Here, J. S. Giguere gets lonely.

REVIEW

When the NHL decided to shake up its flagging game last year, it legalized the two-line pass, eliminated oversized goalie pads, and replaced ties with shootouts—big stuff, for sure. When EA Sports decided to shake things up for this year's iteration of its *NHL* series, it was almost as bold and just as beautiful. Yet if you play the PC version, you'll never know.

NHL 07's Xbox 360 version is stunning: Its innovative "Skill Stick" system truly revolutionizes maneuvering, dekeing, and shooting; its revamped engine eliminates the archaic speed boost function and captures the flow, the nuances, and the real-world speed and grappling of hockey like no prior edition; its players look incredible; its commentary is fresh, deep, and rarely annoying; and its gameplay is awesomely authentic.

Conversely, *NHL 07* for the PC does barely enough to warrant the "sequel" term. It introduces a European component, a salary cap in Dynasty mode, and a player model that more closely mimics individuals' real-life traits and more believably obeys the laws of physics. But it's otherwise *NHL 06* revisited, flaws and all. Pucks still do the strangest things, and the A.I. still suffers frequent brain cramps. Commentator Jim Hughson, a veteran hockey broadcaster, repeats himself (often wrongly) ad nauseam and the game incorporates just a fraction—passing only—of the Xbox 360's wondrous Skill Stick capabilities.

Make no mistake: *NHL 07* is a reflex-mad, feature-packed title that should rightfully impress anyone new to PC hockey. But longtime patrons deserve significantly more than another rehash, particularly when it's already on display elsewhere. ● **Gord Goble**

VERDICT

- **Tons of play modes; great animations; the best (and only) PC hockey game.**
- **Typically minimal EA Sports updates; PC version gets short shrift.**

5/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

NBA LIVE 07

A year older, but not wiser

PUBLISHER: EA Sports DEVELOPER: EA Canada GENRE: Sports AVAILABILITY: Retail Box ESRB RATING: Everyone
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.3GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 3.7GB hard drive space, gamepad (recommended) MULTIPLAYER: 2-4 players VERSION REVIEWED: Gold Master

Lose that layup, you lame.

REVIEW

EA's latest PC hoops game calls itself *Live*, but that doesn't exactly refer to it as *Instant Replay*. A rehash of last year's game, *07* fails in the same ways as its predecessor. The ability to pull down defensive rebounds remains next to impossible; it's frustrating to play lockdown defense, only to be repeatedly beaten on the glass. The result: flip-ins and easy layups for your opponent, severe agitation for you. Another issue is that point guards absolutely dominate the game. Quick point guards—and most of them are quick—rout the defense to rib-bons. They navigate into the paint by shouldering past the defense, then lay the ball in. Repeatedly. And if they miss? No defensive rebound for you. Clog up the lane to keep them out, and they use the open shot. It's misery.

Comparatively, the good points are far too few. The X-Factor—which allows nonstud players to go into superstar zones when they get hot—is great, the player movement's improved (mascots no longer slide around like Michelle Kwan on ice), and the commentary sounds much fresher than that of last year. But there's one more monster disappointment: Once again, *Live* doesn't bother to give its fans online leagues. It's a huge letdown. But really: why make the effort? With no basketball competition in sight, EA can simply update the game's roster crop, sit back, and watch its flawed, uncontested game fly off the shelves. ● **Todd Zuniga**

VERDICT

- **The X-Factor; improved player movement.**
- **It's effectively a wholesale repeat of last year's game; still no online leagues in sight.**

4/10

BELOW AVG

Games for Windows

AGE OF PIRATES: CARIBBEAN TALES

A long walk off a short plank

PUBLISHER: Playnoy/Akella DEVELOPER: Akella GENRE: Action-RPG RELEASED: Retail Box RATING: Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.5GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 4GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard [illegible] 2+1 players [illegible]

REVIEW

***Age of Pirates* is a total waste** of a great idea. The balance of roleplaying and seafaring, which *should* have been the deft trick that pulls in gamers, stumbles. Developer Akella manages to screw up both: Slow-paced combat is further handicapped by terrible controls, and the melee requires nothing more strategic than an itchy mouse-clicking finger. The story line provides a thin veneer of narrative polish for the grindingly repetitive missions that comprise the bulk of the game mechanic. The pace fails to engage, with unforgiving difficulty for novice sailors. So much in this game is left over from Akella's previous effort, *Pirates of the Caribbean*—including many flaws—that *Age of Pirates* comes off as lazy and uninspired.

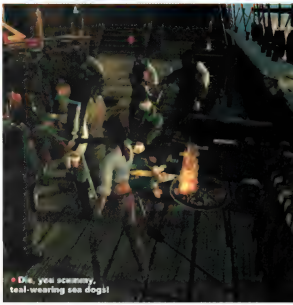
In spite of all the criticisms, some elements manage to compel. Incredible weather effects shimmering on Caribbean waters offer simple pleasures when sailing; fighting off a tropical tempest adds bursts of excitement; and once the game shifts away from looting and more toward establishing colonial outposts, leading a fleet of ships rewards the player with a sense of accomplishment.

But the real nail in the coffin is the code: Whoever certified this as "finished" must *want* PC games dead. Unsolvable missions, random crew and cargo disappearances, broken alerts and conversation trees, and corrupted save files plague the player. Throw in the invasive StarForce copy-protection program, and you have a product we wouldn't wish on the scurviest of scallywags. ● **Jane Pinckard**

VERDICT

- **A cool idea with lovely scenery and some fun exploration.**
- **Grinding combat, a thin plot, clunky controls, and bugs galore.**

4/10
BELOW AVG.
Games for Windows



● **Die, yes scenery, teal-wearing sea dogs!**

AVIATOR. MODERN TECHNOLOGY. CLASSIC DESIGN

With its realistic feel and authentic design, the new **Saitek Aviator** puts you in control of the most thrilling flying experiences ever. Whether you're patrolling the channel or landing a bush plane somewhere in the wilds of Alaska, the **Aviator** gives you unprecedented command over every situation. Sculpted by engineers and molded by artists, the aviator propels classic aviation into the 21st century. So as you prepare to embark on your next adventure, put the **Aviator** into your cockpit and head for the clouds..

Saitek

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JOINT TASK FORCE

Bumpertanks, bad voiceovers, and busywork

DEVELOPER **Vivendi Games** PUBLISHER **Most Wanted** GENRE **Real-Time Strategy** AVAILABILITY **Retail Box** ESRB RATING **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS **2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 2.5GB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER **2-8 players** VERSION REVIEWED **Gold Master**

REVIEW

Everything that *Joint Task Force* does some other game does better. And most of the things *Joint Task Force* does it doesn't even do very well. Its greatest strength: aping Atari's underrated and overlooked *Act of War*.

Not that anything's wrong with aping, as *Act of War* demonstrated so well by shamelessly and effectively borrowing from *Command & Conquer: Generals*. But the trick is to ape well—and since *Joint Task Force* can't even manage basic pathfinding, it's no surprise that it's also bad at aping. It fails at providing anything memorable beyond excruciatingly bad cut-scenes and voice work.

You control a multinational force, led by commanders, each of whom has a cheap version of the hero skill tree from *WarCraft III*. As the commander of the commanders and their men, you're supposed to secure your little infantry guys behind cover, load them in and out of vehicles and buildings, and individually fire AT rockets at targ—oops, too slow. All your guys are dead because you didn't futz enough.

The game attempts to spark a bit of "Is it too soon?" controversy by plunking you down in modern-day hot spots such as Iraq and Bosnia, but the short answer to that question is "No one cares where you're fighting in a game this bad." When you're busy messing around with some inscrutable buttons while your tanks drive into each other, your Humvees race ahead to certain death, and your soldiers stand around taking fire, Baghdad might as well be Timbuktu.

● **Tom Chick**

VERDICT

- **Will renew your appreciation for Atari's *Act of War*.**
- **It's not *Act of War*.**

3/10
POOR
Games for Windows

● The cue for the bleeding-edge, ripped-from-the-headlines topicality by the fact that these guys are Arabs.

PARAWORLD

Been-done-a-saurus

Aspyr Media Spieleentwicklungskombinat Real-Time Strategy Retail Box Teen
1.6GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 3.5GB hard drive space 2-8 players Near-Final Reviewable

Transport units like this giant turtle make easy targets for the faster, more maneuverable reptiles.

REVIEW

Dinosaur-themed PC titles are wont to bring to mind a little game called *Jurassic Park: Trespasser*. In case you don't remember it, you should know that in a recent poll, 99 percent of gamers said they'd rather be mauled by actual dinosaurs than ever play it again. So it's with considerable relief that I can say Aspyr's new RTS *ParaWorld* is about 300 hardline times better than *Trespasser*. Unfortunately, that still leaves it about 72.3 times short of "good."

Conventional in every way, *ParaWorld* serves up the same-old, WarCraft II-era RTS fare. Build your base, weather the initial A.I. onslaught, tech up, and mush your foes. Been there, try again. It's enjoyable for the first couple missions, but anyone who's ever played an RTS will scour for the "yawn" button after 15 minutes. On the plus side, deliciously lame dialogue butchered by poorly-awful voice actors provides brilliant comic relief. If you have a penchant for Ed Wood films, *ParaWorld*'s cut-scenes may justify the purchase.

Not much here for the rest of us, though. The graphics are colorful...but not spectacular; the dinosaur units represent an interesting but boringly realized idea. *ParaWorld*'s core gameplay (or at least balance) is very poor. The one outstanding feature, a beautiful original score. Too bad nobody buys these things for the music. ● **Eric Neigher**

VERDICT

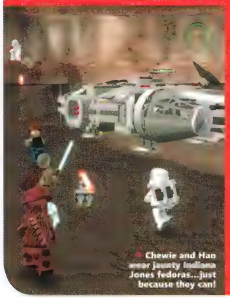
- **Unintentionally hilarious "B-movie" writing; soaring original score.**
- **Conventional gameplay; cluttered controls; nonsensical storyline; slooooow pace.**

5/10
AVERAGE
Games for Windows

LEGO STAR WARS II: THE ORIGINAL TRILOGY

Laugh it up, fuzzball

LucasArts | Traveller's Tales | Action | Retail Box | Everyone 10+
1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 3GB hard drive space, gamepad (recommended) | 2 players | WD Retail Box



Chewie and Han avoid jaunty fedoras...just because they can!

REVIEW

It's one of the inalienable truths of life: Even a tiny plastic Billy Dee Williams is smoother than you. While the Lego-fied Lando suffers from the same friendly fire problems (punching and kicking his erstwhile pals while the enemy peppers them all with blaster fire) that plague the chaotic larger parties in this game, he never slugs a girl. Unlike those louts Luke and Han, Lando knows the ladies are for smooching, not smashing—accidentally attack Leia as Lando, and he'll plant a kiss on her outstretched hand.

That's just one tiny moment of whimsy in a game jam-packed with them. *Lego Star Wars II* distills the three original *Star Wars* films to the set pieces that truly matter, such as the trench run, the speeder chase on Endor, and the *Millennium Falcon*'s escape in the asteroid field. And it does it all in an ecstatically ludicrous Lego motif that restores the joy that the prequel trilogy sucked from the franchise.

LSW2 is almost a carbon copy of the first game, letting you bound your way through the galaxy and collect plastic "studs" to later exchange for any of a zillion different things. The big difference here: the inclusion of all the vehicles—you can pilot AT-STs, X-wings, and more...and the vehicle sequences (especially on Endor) are ridiculously fun. It's a short game, but you'll want to replay it in free play mode to get all the unlockables and other bonuses—and to laugh at all the silliness just one more time. ● **Robert Coffey**

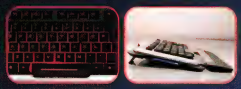
VERDICT

- **A fun, funny breath of fresh air for a franchise that's grown tedious.**
- **Crowded parties and some targeting issues lead to friendly fire incidents.**

8/10
GREAT
Games for Windows

ECLIPSE II. CONTROL THE FUTURE

- ILLUMINATED BACKLIT KEYS IN BLUE, RED & PURPLE
- MEDIA KEYS CONTROL AUDIO / Play / Stop / Volume
- VARIABLE LIGHTING CONTROL DIMMER
- 3 POSITION KEYBOARD ANGLES FROM ZERO SLOPE
- SIDE LIGHTING HELPS REDUCE COMPUTER EYE STRAIN



What if you could change everything? The way you work. The way you play. The way you move. With the all-new **Eclipse II** you can. With more power and features than its predecessor, it's all here. Illuminated backlit keys that glow red or blue at the touch of a button and dim with the turn of a dial. An adjustable wrist rest and 3 keyboard angle positions that adapt to your needs for your comfort. Side end lighting to help reduce eyestrain and media transport keys that control your music effortlessly. It is more of a revolution than an evolution and it can be all yours now.

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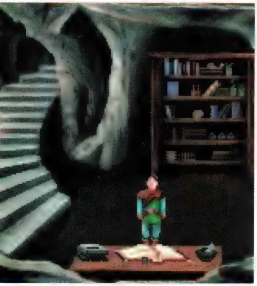
www.saitekusa.com

KING'S QUEST III: TO HEIR IS HUMAN

Another labor of love

PUBLISHER: **Infamous Adventures** DEVELOPER: **Infamous Adventures** GENRE: **Adventure** AVAILABILITY: **Free Download (www.infamous-adventures.com)** ESRB RATING: **Not Rated**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **166MHz CPU, 32MB RAM, 30MB hard drive space (300MB with voice pack)** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Public v2.0 with voice pack**



REVIEW

Fan-crafted remakes arguably trump retail products when it comes to keeping the adventure game genre alive; recent projects like *King's Quest II+* and *Maniac Mansion Deluxe* certainly outshine 90 percent of the soulless adventures that actually make it onto shelves. The newest free rehash to hit the Web, the Infamous Adventures group's *King's Quest III* (a remake of Sierra's 1986 gem), pays suitable tribute to the original...and has plenty of fun with its source material in the process.

The characters, story, and locations remain wholly intact: You step into the shoes of a medieval slave named Gwydion, who desperately seeks a way to rebel against his sinister captor—an effort that mainly takes the form of (surprise!) numerous inventory puzzles. The game's original EGA visuals and parser interface are updated to a 256-color, point-and-click motif that mirrors Sierra's early '90s releases, with crudely rendered head shots that pop onto the screen as each character speaks, accompanied by some humorously (intentionally?) bad voiceovers—including a surprise appearance by former Sierra designer Josh Mandel, reprising his now-infamous role as King Graham—via an optional speech pack.

Longtime *King's Quest* fans, rest assured that all of the original *KQ3* puzzles remain unaltered (with one minor late-game exception involving a deadly yeti) sans irritating copy protection (the classic *KQ3* involved *lots* of careful typing). And *King's Quest* newbies: Prepare for a fun—though short and relatively unsophisticated—peek into the annals of adventure game history. ● **Ryan Scott**

VERDICT

- **A fun trip down memory lane for Sierra diehards.**
- **Newcomers might balk at simple story, short length, and hokey voiceover work.**

7/10 GOOD

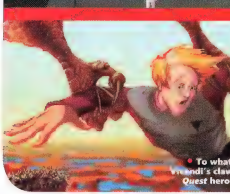
Games for Windows

THE SIERRA COLLECTIONS

Compromised classics

PUBLISHER: **"Sierra"** DEVELOPER: **Sierra** GENRE: **Adventure** AVAILABILITY: **Retail Box** ESRB RATING: **Everyone (*King's Quest*); Teen (*Space Quest*, *Police Quest*); Mature (*Leisure Suit Larry*)**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **800MHz CPU, 128MB RAM, 1.2GB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

● **Leisure Suit Larry wonders when he's gonna score with some ladies. We wonder when we're gonna score some better Sierra compilations.**



● **To what cruel fate do Vivendi's claws carry *Space Quest* hero Roger Wilco?**

REVIEW

Never played Sierra's classic point-and-click adventure games during their mid-'80s heyday? Drop any and all notions of graphics over gameplay, rush out to your local software shop, and snag these $20 budget boxes now. Legacy fans: Continue to cry yourselves to sleep over how spectacularly current IP (intellectual property) owner Vivendi Games mismanages Sierra's legendary name.

Each of these four boxes compiles one of Sierra's groundbreaking adventure-game franchises: Roberta Williams' fairy tale–inspired *King's Quest* series; the zany *Space Quest* sci-fi spoofs; *Leisure Suit Larry*'s amorous escapades; and the gritty and (for their time) realistic *Police Quest* adventures. The icon-based (and earlier) parser-powered interfaces, clever puzzles, and stellar stories still act as a measuring stick for the genre. Everything here's indisputably worth any cerebral gamer's time.

The shoddy presentation lets the hot air out of the balloon. Sure, they're budget releases—minimal packaging with paper CD sleeves—but they're also incomplete, with the *King's Quest Collection* missing two games (and a working installer), *Larry* missing five (including the CD version of *LSL6*—just the crappy floppy version here), and *Space Quest* and *Police Quest* down one each. No extras, no interviews, it's the PC-gaming equivalent of putting the Queen of England up at a Motel 6. ● **Ryan Scott**

VERDICT

- **Some of the PC's most important classics, available in XP-friendly format.**
- **The most disrespectful presentation imaginable for games of this pedigree.**

4/10 BELOW AVG.

Games for Windows

THE HOT LIST

Five still-available games to buy right now

ADVENTURE FEVER

Thirsting for more witty dialogue and perplexing inventory puzzles after playing *Sam & Max: Culture Shock*? Miffed at Vivendi Games' less-than-stellar Sierra boxed sets? Head down to your local game store (or just jump online) and order up a few of these classic adventure games you may have missed the first time around. Get 'em while you still can!

MISSING: GAME OF THE YEAR EDITION

The original *Missing: Since January* and its expansion pack, *Missing: The 13th Victim*, relied on an interesting bit of metagaming, e-mailing players with clues and directing them to various websites to hunt for the solutions to many in-game puzzles. Not too far off from EA's *Majestic*.

Games for Windows: The Official Magazine editor (and *Missing* reviewer) Darren Gladstone mused at the time that he had a lot of difficulty keeping up with the many missives that wound up in his Yahoo.com account spam folder—but given a workable e-mail provider, *Missing* makes for one of the best games yet from publisher DreamCatcher Games. The *Game of the Year Edition* supplies both the base game and the expansion...just in time for the upcoming *Missing* sequel, *Evidence: The Last Ritual*.

PSYCHONAUTS

OK, so it's not a *proper* graphic adventure game, per se, but this hilarious, psychedelic third-person action-adventure/platformer *did* spawn from the messed-up mind of *Grim Fandango* and *Day of the Tentacle* designer Tim Schafer—and that certainly counts for something.

Psychonauts' oddball story (kids at the local psychic summer camp become pawns in a madman's evil ploy) and bizarre character designs bear the clear stamp of Schafer's acerbic wit, and the action-packed gameplay is essentially just a different way to gift-wrap the traditional puzzle elements Schafer is known for. Owing to a lack of name recognition (and some mediocre marketing by publisher Majesco), *Psychonauts* didn't exactly fly off store shelves—so do yourself a big favor and rescue a copy from the budget bin before it's too late. Barring that, you can download it from Valve's Steam service.

WANTED: A WILD WESTERN ADVENTURE

Most longtime adventure game fanatics fondly remember the knee-slapping antics of Freddy Pharkas, Frontier Pharmacist (Sierra's dark-in-a-*Blazing Saddles*-style parody of the wild wild West), but few realize the sheer sort of fun to be had with DreamCatcher's *Wanted: A Wild Western Adventure* (built a budget to 3 styles of the Sierra).

OK, so series fans Freelance Historian isn't quite up to Freddy Pharkas' caliber (no pun intended), but the adventures of this horse-ridin' hombre who hears more than a passing resemblance to a certain Tom Hanks-voiced cowboy from Pixar's *Toy Story* should still more than a few grins from anyone in the mood for amusement (and not just for the inevitably hokey voiceover work).

ESCAPE FROM MONKEY ISLAND

"Hello! My name is Guybrush Threepwood, and I want to be a pirate!" Few adventure game fanatics can claim they don't know those hallowed words. LucasArts' zany *Monkey Island* franchise tops many genre fanatics' "All-Time Best" lists, and though we've seen no sign of the series since 2000, many eagerly await/hope/pray for a fifth installment. Until that happens, keep yourself busy with the franchise's fourth offering, which updates the classic cartoony look with 3D graphics and an interface to match. Bumbling buccaneer-wannabe Threepwood once again crosses swords with his undead archnemesis LeChuck, while continuing to seek buried booty and woo his newly wedded wife, Governor Elaine Marley. Sounds an awful lot like a certain Disney-themed pirate movie, doesn't it? Helpful hint: *Monkey Island* beat the films to the punch (and took its inspiration from the theme park ride!).

MYST: 10TH ANNIVERSARY DVD EDITION

The original *Myst* caused a stir when it came out back in the grand old days of 1993. For many, it spelled a revolution in adventure gaming—realistic-looking environments and a first-person perspective meant some of the world's most immersive gameplay (at the time). But for a lot of adventure game stalwarts, *Myst* was an affront to the standards set by Sierra and LucasArts; they quickly dismissed it as a boring click-fest with a poor narrative. With each successive entry, the series gained more followers. Now, five games strong, *Myst*'s had an undeniable impact on the adventure game genre. See how it all began in this three-game boxed set.

DO YOURSELF A FAVOR AND RESCUE A COPY OF *PSYCHONAUTS* FROM THE BUDGET BIN BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE.

Extend

Where your games live on forever!

Tom's MG42 is burned alive while trying to flee flamethrower-brandishing engineers.

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TOM vs. BRUCE

Two gamers enter. One gamer wins.

COMPANY OF HEROES

Let's get *Coyin'*

PLAYERS: **THQ** DEVELOPER: **Relic Entertainment** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy** ESRB RATING: **Mature**

VIRTUAL SHOOT CLUB

***The first game** to bear the official Games for Windows logo: Relic Entertainment's World War II RTS,* Company of Heroes. *What better game for us to cover in our gamer-versus-gamer column in the first issue of* Games for Windows: The Official Magazine? *Plus, we both think the game is aces. But next month, just to prove we're not toeing any corporate line, we promise we'll do an obscure game.*

TOM: Bruce Geryk and I have been doing these articles longer than the U.S. fought in World War II. Traditionally, we play real-time strategy games, which I win. Every now and then, we'll play some turgid World War II war game, which Bruce wins. I figure *Company of Heroes* is the best of both worlds. I can pit my skill at shift-clicking, attack moving, and build queuing against Bruce's knowledge of things like CRTs and how many centimeters of armor are in the front of a Tiger tank.

BRUCE: Traditionally, I play the good guys to Tom Chick's bad guys. I'm the Humans to his Zerg, the Allies to his Axis, and the Republican presidential candidate to his chairman of the Politburo. This gives you a reason to cheer for me, because I usually lose. The reasons for this are manifold, but the main one is this: Tom gets games about a month before anybody else and plays them in his weekly professional gaming training sessions (called "Shoot Club") until he has the hotkeys stuck to his fingers. Oh yeah, and he's really good.

TOM: The map is Angoville, an idyllic patch of farmhouses and hedgerows that we're about to seriously mess up. I'm at the south end and Bruce is at the north end. This map contains three victory points, and whoever controls the majority of them starts the other guy's score ticking down from 500. First player to zero loses. You know *Battlefield? Coy* is like that.

BRUCE: In official military talk, the abbreviation for "Company" is "Coy." I told Tom this, and pretty soon he was sending me messages like, "You wanna Coy?" and "Whaddya doin' right now...*Coyin'*?" Back when we played *Guild Wars*, he got no end of delight from the fact that the Axe Mastery skill sounds like "Ass Mastery." It's kind of like that all over again, just to give you an idea of the level of sophistication I'm dealing with here.

TOM: Bruce has a victory point near his base that we'll call "Bruce's victory point." It's kind of out in the open, but it's got some farmhouses covering it. I have a victory point near my base that we'll call "Tom's victory point." It's closed up behind hedgerows and a wall, and it's got a single farmhouse overlooking it. A third victory point sits in the open fields to the west. It's probably going to get pretty bloody out there.

BRUCE: As you'd expect, "my" victory point is in the middle of some wide-open kill zone, while Tom's is packed away nicely behind an impenetrable force field and covered by a giant laser. Kind of weird how that always happens! You should start keeping track right now of how many things "just happen" to work out this way.

TOM: One of the first things I do is put a machine gun team in the farmhouse overlooking my victory point. I believe the saying goes, "Good MG42s make good neighbors."

BRUCE: Naturally, Tom has a dilithium-powered underground bunker to put his machine gun in and I have a small farmhouse. Having an impenetrable bunker wouldn't help me right now, though, because I'm not smart enough to use it. My guys are running around grabbing objectives, which is what I was told is a good strategy. Hey...what does it mean that a unit got sniped? >

Bruce's jeep gets chewed up by Tom's MG42 and then destroyed by a Panzerfaust

Bruce's riflemen are sniped by Tom's sniper.

> TOM GETS GAMES ABOUT A MONTH BEFORE ANYBODY ELSE AND PLAYS THEM UNTIL HE HAS THE HOTKEYS STUCK TO HIS FINGERS.

• Bruce's riflemen kill Tom's Volksgrenadiers with a grenade...and are then swiped by Tom's sniper.

• StuG vs. Sherman showdown!

• Shermans are safer traveling in pairs...until they're flanked by StuGs.

TOM: Another thing that makes a good neighbor early in the game is a sniper. Sure, they're expensive, but they're a terrible annoyance to your opponent. The subtext of the "*Unit sniped*" message is "*Hey, guess what? The other player is about to entirely kill one or more of your squads unless you do some serious micromanagement trying to hunt down a single stealthy dude whose powerful one-shot kill is going to rack up tons of combat experience for your opponent.*" Plus, I can imagine my sniper is Ed Harris from *Enemy at the Gates*. If Bruce builds a sniper, he can imagine he's Barry Pepper from *Saving Private Ryan*.

BRUCE: That whole sniper thing from *Enemy at the Gates* is most likely apocryphal, but it sure makes a good story, huh? *Company of Heroes* is good at making stories that way. They're no more real, since they're just in a computer game instead of a movie, but it's amazing how long I remember things like the time I put a machine gun in the big house by the central victory point and then dropped artillery strikes on Tom's assault teams in the street below. Unfortunately, that was in a previous game. Which I lost, by the way.

TOM: While my sniper, Ed, picks off Allied riflemen in the west, Bruce diverts an annoying little jeep from his victory point, inadvertently driving it past the farmhouse housing my MG42. The machine gun chews it up just enough so that my Volksgrenadiers (German for "folks who throw grenades") can quickly kill it with a Panzerfaust (German for "one of the fastest ways to get killed by a Panzer tank, which will immediately see where you fired from and kill you, but great for softer targets like jeeps and half-tracks"). All's quiet on the western front, so my pioneers start grabbing territory in the west while the Volks head back to push toward Bruce's victory point.

BRUCE: One of the things I *don't* like about *Coy.* the micromanagement of things like grenades and Panzerfausts. It's very *WarCraft III*-ish, which annoys me a little bit because your soldiers are otherwise good at using cover and maneuvering.

TOM: The crucial thing about direct control of grenades and Panzerfausts is that they cost munitions, so they're a form of resource management. In any given game, you've got limited munitions. Part of the strategy is how you use them.

Speaking of which...ho ho ho, now I have a half-track! The first player to get a vehicle on the field usually enjoys an edge, which might include forcing the other player to burn munitions in trying to counter that edge with stuff like sticky bombs or Panzerfausts. I send my half-track against Bruce's victory point. This will probably cause him to freak out and focus all his forces over here, leaving the west side of the map to me. So I send my lonely little sniper out to grab some territory. Go get 'em, Ed.

BRUCE: Tom's Panzerkampfwagen totally freaked me out. I haven't researched sticky bombs yet, for no good reason I can think of other than it just slipped my mind. So, of course, I'm now faced with a cheesy half-track—or in German, a Sonderkraftfahrzeug—that's chewing up my riflemen. I need to focus all my forces over there. Wait, look who just wandered into the middle of my other rifle squads...

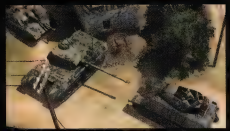
TOM: Oops, here come two squads of Allied riflemen after my sniper. I divert my Volks, but they're quickly killed by grenades. However, in the firefight, Ed does a lot of damage and drives Bruce's troops back. Area secure. Or, as they say in Germany, "Die area secure."

BRUCE: Yeah, they say "die," all right. In this case, Tom's MG42 died when my engineers invented flamethrowers. They're very smart engineers, and I'm sure they'll go a long way in life. If Tom doesn't snipe them.

TOM: The Germans have rocket artillery called a Nebelwerfer, which is German for "artillery that shoots rockets." However, I don't need artillery; having spent my experience points on the Terror Doctrine, I now have the power to drop propaganda leaflets on Bruce's soldiers. This causes them to retreat back to base—presumably to show these leaflets to their buddies or something—at which point they can march right back out onto the battlefield. It doesn't kill them, so it's a humane way to stop Bruce when he's got a squad of soldiers trying to capture a flag. It's the martial version of "catch-and-release." With a click of my mouse, his soldiers are propagandized into thinking better of what they're doing.

BRUCE: The first few times Tom did this, I thought it was a bug in the program, maybe put there by an elite German haxör. This is probably the most ridiculous game mechanic I have ever seen in any game, if you don't count the Volatile Rum in *World of WarCraft*.

TOM: Up near Bruce's side of the map, he and I are doing a fairly extended dance around his victory point. He'll send a team of riflemen into range of my half-track to try to grab the victory point. They'll hold out under fire for a while, but he'll eventually pull them back after he's turned the victory point neutral...at which point my pioneers bundle out of the half-track to take it back. We do this a few times; it's very courteous and even somewhat formal, like war



• That's what we call close combat!

• Sometimes, artillery is better late than never...even if just for the satisfaction of enjoying the fireworks.

Bruce is fond of using masses of riflemen; Tom is fond of killing them with his half-track's new flamethrower.

used to be in the olden days. Neither of us is carpet bombing each other's populations or anything like that.

BRUCE: I would love to carpet bomb Tom into the Stone Age, but I have the small problem of munitions. I need 200 to launch one of my devastating artillery barrages, but Tom's cleverly cut me off from enough supply points to make the thought of off-board artillery an unimaginable luxury. In one way, it's a great mechanism for incorporating war-gamey things like artillery support into a real-time strategy game. In another way, it totally sucks.

TOM: And in yet a third way, it's Bruce's awakening to the harsh reality that maybe he shouldn't have spent all those munitions throwing grenades at my lowly Volks earlier on. Speaking of which...as we sent engineers out to grab territory when the match started, I went to the trouble of closing off the easternmost territory with barbed wire. But Bruce hasn't even had the common courtesy to try to take it. For the entire game, he never even moves close to it. If a guy lays down defenses, the least you can do is be stymied by them.

BRUCE: To be honest, I haven't even figured out how to lay down defenses myself. As usual, it's because I don't have anything worth defending.

TOM: Bruce and I have a bit of a standoff over the west victory point. He's got a jeep watching it, but I've got a bunker—and Ed, my sniper—covering it. I bring in a Puma armored car to make sure Bruce doesn't get any funny ideas. But then Bruce shows up with two riflemen squads and an M4 Sherman tank. Luckily, as soon as it attacks, my first Stug tank destroyer rolls off the assembly line. It pulls up and goes front-armor-to-front-armor with the Sherman. The Stug wins.

BRUCE: I guess that's why they call it a tank destroyer. The Sherman's actually an anti-infantry tank in this game, which is kind of historical in a way. What isn't very historical: Tom can't spell "Sturmgeschütz." Or even "StuG."

TOM: I can't spell that first thing, much less put those two dots over the U, but I certainly can capitalize the G in "StuG." The problem is that Microsoft Word keeps trying to correct it. And while I'm a wiz at micromanaging an RTS, I can't be bothered to micromanage a word processor, even if it is made by our new corporate overlords.

BRUCE: Fair enough. Maybe Tom can use some of his *World of WarCraft* subscription fees for a Berlitz course.

TOM: Now Bruce reclaims his victory point with another Sherman tank. Wait...make that a pair of Sherman tanks. I quickly divert a StuG and a PaK 38 antitank gun east to reinforce that side of the map. Except, while I'm doing that, Bruce swings his tanks around to the west victory point. We essentially swap flanks in a sort of polite do-si-do. Luckily, I'm fielding a second StuG, which trades fire with both Shermans.

BRUCE: Since I'm nothing if not a student of history, I try and angle for a side shot on Tom's StuG with my Sherman, since that's what they did in real life. Unfortunately, in real life, they didn't have to click a mouse a million times to do it.

TOM: As Bruce's second Sherman flanks my StuG, my original StuG and PaK 38 arrive just in time. Bruce's tanks get caught in the middle; I sit back and enjoy a nice Sherman sandwich. Total score: Bruce is down two Shermans, and my dinged-up StuGs will be as good as new after a little love from the local pioneers. Now that the area's cleared of hostile armor, my Puma parks just outside Bruce's base to intercept any infantry heading out for battle.

BRUCE: How cute—Tom has a little Kubelwagen parked near my base. He's harassing my infantry and generally causing trouble. But, as Patrick Swayze once famously said, "Wolverines!" Or, at least, one Wolverine. And that's all for that Kubelwagen. Now to deal with that StuG.

BRUCE: Tom's really shut me down at "my" victory point. So, concentrating not only all my virtual forces, but also all my actual mental energy, I arrange a coordinated attack on the farmhouse, with grenades and everything. It starts off well, but somehow ends up failing, which is roughly how the entire game has gone for me. I'm not eager to see how this alternate universe will look once Tom's Nazis take over.

TOM: "Was ist Nazis? Wir sind keine Nazis. Wir sind deutsche Wermacht." •

FINAL SCORE

TOM: 428 BRUCE: 0

Tom Chick

In addition to being one of the video-game industry's most prolific freelance critics, Tom Chick also runs the popular website QuarterToThree.com.

Bruce Geryk

GFW contributor Bruce Geryk has written about videogames for over 20 years. He loves war games like most people love oxygen.

LINE OF ATTACK

Your monthly guide to hardcore war-gaming

THE MIND'S EYE

"It's about gameplay, not graphics!" Grognards cling to the idea that ugly graphics don't matter, because in a good war game, the game mechanics keep you engaged. Yet, in a contest between the nice 3D perspective of *Combat Mission* and the earlier 2D look of games like *Panthers in the Shadows*, the winner's pretty clear, and with good reason: imagination.

Games rely on our mind's eye. Plenty of wargamers got hooked on the genre due to its historical connections, and strong visuals are an effective way to build on those connections, no matter how much we bellow about substance over style. Come on—who thinks the divisional insignias in *The Ardennes Offensive* would have worked just as well if they'd been the numbers 1, 2, 4, and so on, instead of cool historical symbols? Early cardboard war games featured rudimentary maps, but soon switched to more elaborate and attractive terrain depictions. Why? It's all part of creating a connection; it's an illusion—but oftentimes a strong one.

● **The ubiquitous top-down perspective makes most war games look like the tactical sims that they are...**

Relic Entertainment's *Company of Heroes* does something that most "real" war games haven't yet managed: it draws you into the world it depicts, rather than the one you've created in your mind to translate the game's crude symbology. Even with frantic clicking, ahistorical game mechanics (who ever heard of using V-1 rockets on the battlefield?) and RTS resource conventions, it manages to transcend games like *Close Combat* by translating certain combat moments perfectly to the PC screen: the setting up of a heavy machine gun,

● **...while *Company of Heroes* looks more like a Hollywood movie.**

or the lobbing of a grenade into a bunker. Even as you "build" riflemen and "research" flamethrowers, you get enough "real war" moments to make you see possibilities in future games. For any kind of war-gamer, that's exciting. ● **Bruce Geryk**

Bruce Geryk

Bruce thinks that games with nice graphics are just swell.

FALLING PIECES

The best in casual games

FRYIN' THE BIG FISH

As accommodating as *GFW*'s companion site 1UP.com is, it might prove a little intimidating for your mom (or parole officer). It's great that hardcore gamers have a place to hang out—but where do...errrr...softcore gamers go to chat about those relaxing tile-matching time-wasters they love? My Big Fish Games—that's where.

Big Fish Games (www.bigfishgames.com) isn't just one of the biggest casual gaming websites: At 3 to 4 million unique visitors per month (according to Internet traffic monitor comScore Media Metrix), it's the ninth-largest U.S. game site across all types of games—including core, casual, and MMO. And now Big Fish gives all those visitors another reason to dig into the site via My Big Fish Games (www.mybigfishgames.com).

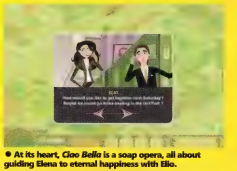
Like 1UP.com, membership costs nothing and requires only an e-mail address. Once you sign up, you get your own webspace to proselytize your five best-loved games. Just signing up gets you two free games...and even better, any player

● **Elena relaxes in the sauna in *Ciao Bella*.**

that downloads and purchases a game through your page nets you 25 percent of its purchase price in on-site credit toward your next game. After just 20 days, My Big Fish Games closed in on 100,000 members...and its customer-support department was swamped with "thank you" e-mail from grateful casual gamers.

CIAO BELLA

Should you sign up for My Big Fish Games, you'll quickly find that the five titles from which you



● **At its heart, *Ciao Bella* is a soap opera, all about guiding Elena to eternal happiness with Elio.**

pick your two free games are pretty dull. Instead, I suggest you start pimping your page and begin collecting credits for *Ciao Bella*: Part soap opera, part *The Sims*, part adventure/strategy game, *Ciao Bella* tasks you with managing all aspects of a young woman's life, with a large emphasis on finding romantic fulfillment. It won't be everyone's cup of tea, but the game has a great stylized look...and plenty of charm. ● **Robert Coffey**

Robert Coffey

Robert wants everyone to buy games via http://my.bigfishgames.com/CitizenPain so he never has to spend his own hard-earned money again.

PART SOAP OPERA, PART *THE SIMS*, PART ADVENTURE/STRATEGY GAME.

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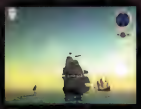

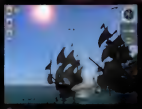

T — TEEN
Alcohol and Tobacco Reference
Mild Language
Violence
ESRB
Same Experience May Change During Online Play

PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

PLAYLOGIC

Akella

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UPDATES

Our two cents on the latest mods and patches

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE-EARTH II V1.05

The winds of a 7,200-word changelog blow over Middle-earth

PUBLISHER **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER **EALA** GENRE **Real-Time Strategy** AVAILABILITY **Download (bfme2.ea.com)**
USK RATING **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS **1.6GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 6GB hard drive space**
MULTIPLAYER **2-8 players** VERSION REVIEWED **v1.05**

MY PRECIOUS!

EDITORS' CHOICE

Games for Windows

In the grand tradition of the *Lord of the Rings* extended-edition DVDs, now we have a sort of "extended edition" for EA's *Battle for Middle-earth II*. Nine months after its release, the real-time strategy game of Peter Jackson's movies of J.R.R. Tolkein's books essentially gets rebooted. Now the Nazgul are really fearsome, the Dwarves are really tough, Goblin wall-crawling becomes marginally useful, and the heroes of the Men of the West and the Elves aren't quite so all-powerful.

The reboot comes in the form of an extensive patch. Version 1.05 (followed shortly thereafter by v1.06 to correct a problem with the multiplayer lobby) changes everything you thought you knew about real-time strategy in Middle-earth. This used to be a really fast game, with armies sweeping across the map like waves, crushing buildings with ease; it wasn't the sort of RTS that gave you the room to just hunker down. Buildings sat in the backseat while armies drove the game.

RAISE HIGH THE ROOF BEAMS

But *BFME2* v1.05 changes how buildings fit into the calculus of combat: Although defensive towers and resource buildings receive fewer hit points (with the exception of Dwarven mines, which are conspicuously tougher), they take only about half as much damage from most units. They also start to repair themselves sooner, so it's harder to follow-up on a failed assault.

Walls—which no one ever used—now cost less and only take damage from siege units. The fortress add-ons that let you customize your base are tougher and cheaper, too. It used to be easy enough to just ride your cavalry up to a fortress and knock it over; now, such a direct approach is a great way to squander units. Catapults, battering rams, and Ents suddenly become important parts of any army. Version 1.05 swings the pendulum back toward the beta, when some testers complained that tough buildings and walls led to stalemates.

Not everything's copacetic, though. Leadership, formerly a simple, broad bonus you could apply to your units (indicated by a glowing yellow light), gets balkanized into several different types of bonuses from various sources. It's an unfortunate example of one of the game's more elegant concepts turned fussy and complicated.

THE NINE RIDE AGAIN

Version 1.05 radically changes the interplay among units, so prepare to relearn who trumps whom. Rangers, Rohirrim, and Dwarven battlewagons get beaten with the nerf stick; Elven eagles, mumakil, and naval units receive lots of love (although, alas, naval combat still amounts to little more than a pointless diversion); and everyone's heroes get shuffled up and repriced. One side effect of the hero changes: The Create-A-Hero mode is even more out of whack, with custom heroes running roughshod over the game balance. Maybe the upcoming expansion pack will restore custom heroes to something resembling a well-tuned feature.

Overall, version 1.05 signifies an enormous overhaul, with more nuanced options for what to build and how to use your armies. With more back-and-forth, post-v1.05 matches tend to last longer. And with a game of *BFME2*'s caliber, that's a good thing.

Tom Chick

VERSION 1.05 RADICALLY CHANGES THE INTERPLAY AMONG UNITS. SO PREPARE TO RELEARN WHO TRUMPS WHOM.

VERDICT

+ Better pacing and balance all around.

- Ready to relearn everything you knew?

9/10 EXCELLENT

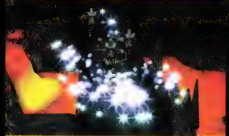
Games for Windows

AFTERLIFE

IRON GRIP: THE OPPRESSION

www.isotx.com

This total conversion Source mod (created by a Dutch art student) combines traditional shooter gameplay and real-time strategy elements, all wrapped in a unique vision of the future. The first public beta went live in late September, with the *Iron Grip* team working diligently on bugfixes ever since.



ULTIMA V: LAZARUS

www.u5lazarus.com

Ultima geeks eager for a new single-player sojourn into the lands of Britannia should take a peek at this ambitious and well-crafted mod for the original *Dungeon Siege*. *Lazarus* reinvents the classic *Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny* for a modern audience, and as of the most recent build (v1.20, available from the URL above), it's bug-free—and fully moddable itself!

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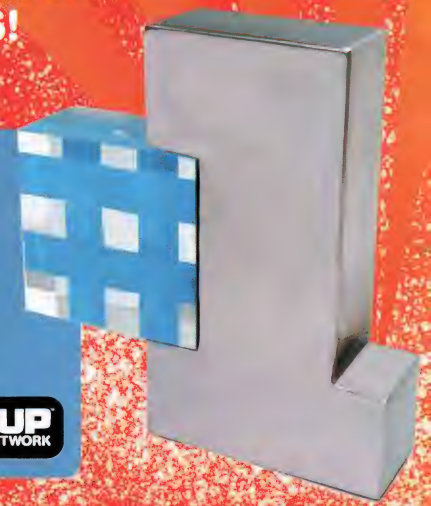

1UP NETWORK

CRISIS ON INFINITE SERVERS

Trekking across the vast MMORPG landscape. This month: *Eve Online*.

EVE ONLINE

If you've ever made any sort of substantial time commitment to an MMO, you probably know "that guy." You know—the guy who operates his own personal command center with a dozen or so PCs...all running macros, developing multiple characters on multiple accounts, and farming in-game cash and sweet loot at all odd hours of the day (and night). In short: the guy who, long ago, crossed that dangerous line between "hobby" and "obsession." In my world, this perfectly describes my buddy Hwang.

I met the guy during my PVP-crazy *Ultima Online* days, where he purchased multiple houses during the game's postlaunch land rush...and wound up making a huge in-game profit when he sold the real estate off for many times its original value. Hwang was sort of a tycoon that way—but he grew bored of *UO*'s slapdash economy after a few years and soon began beating the *Shadowbane* drum. And once we (quickly) tired of

These look like good stats, I guess. Too bad *Eve* doesn't bother to explain their importance.

SHEESH...HOW'S A NEW PLAYER EXPECTED TO KNOW ALL THIS?

that, we went, like vagrant wanderers on a digital highway, from one MMO to another: First to *Star Wars Galaxies*, then *City of Heroes*, and most recently, *Guild Wars*. All decent games, yes...but none quite achieved that balance between my PVP tendencies and the virtual dollar signs in Hwang's eyes the same way *UO* did. Then, a few months ago, Hwang called me up to rave about an entirely new game. Well, new to us, at least.

"Hey, man!" Hwang greeted me in his usual upbeat tone. "I've been checking out *Eve Online* for the last month or so. It's pretty sweet—great player-run economy, the biggest-ass universe you've ever seen, and yes, even PVP to keep you happy. And it all takes place in outer space. I hear it even scored a ton of angry *Galaxies* players after that awful 'New Game Enhancements' reboot. It's a nice change from the fantasy stuff, I gotta say. You wanna come check it out, too? I've already got a pretty nice setup going, and I can definitely kick down some cash to get you started."

I recalled hearing a steady stream of good things about *Eve*, which originally launched back in 2003 while Hwang and I were still hot for *Shadowbane*. I eyed it with passive interest...but between my then-current fix and the impending *Galaxies* launch, I never had the time to check it out. But here, three years later, my languishing interest in *Guild Wars* left me yearning for a new MMO. I took Hwang up on his offer and signed up for a two-week *Eve* trial account.

I HEART MISSILE LAUNCHERS

After firing up the game client, hitting the "Create New Character" button, and picking from one of the game's four equally bizarre-looking races (I chose the Caldari, based on Hwang's advice), I stared blankly at a menu that stated "Choose bloodline and gender." I swiped my mouse cursor over the three Caldari bloodlines: Achura, Deteis, and Civire. I sprang for the last one, as the Civire bloodline enjoys proficiency with missile launchers—something I figured might come in handy for blowing other players to smithereens.

Hwang quickly expressed dismay at my decision. "You gotta pick Deteis, man. That Missile Launcher Operation skill's nothing to sweat over.... You can get that real easy. You gotta look at the stats! The Deteis have the best stats, hands down." I examined each bloodline's attributes, noting that each character possessed five defining stats: Intelligence, Charisma, Perception, Memory, and Willpower. Nothing in the menu indicated their relative importance. Sheesh... how's a new player expected to know all this?

Hwang laid it out for me. "You've got these five stats, right? Those determine how fast you learn skills. Like that Missile Launcher one—the higher your Perception, the faster you learn. You can learn any skill you want, with no limits. But your stats are pretty much set in stone. I mean, you can increase 'em some during the game, but if you gimp your stats now, it's always gonna hurt. I went through three characters before I figured it all out. Trust me, bud—Deteis all the way!"

BUILDING A BETTER DETEIS

After tweaking my character's facial features until he looked like something vaguely approximating "cool," I let Hwang walk me through the rest

The character-creation process doesn't quite trump *City of Heroes*' near-limitless palette of options...but it comes closer than most other MMOs.

of the creation process. He told me the "correct" choices for my character's ancestry, school, department, field, and specialty—all of which determine what kinds of skills you start out with. I named my space-tycoon-to-be "Gamelon" (after my old *UO* thief) and clicked the "Enter Game" button.

"Welcome!" a computerized voice chimed as I stared at a tiny space pod floating in a bleak, gray hangar. "I am Aura, your spacecraft's computer. Congratulations on your pilot's license."

Hwang warned me about this part—an obfuscated newbie lesson on piloting and hangar facilities. "The tutorial's wonky," he told me. "You'd better set aside a couple of hours to get through it, but trust me—it makes all this piloting and economy stuff look harder than it really is. I'll show ya the ropes, man. You're gonna love *Eve* even more than *UO*!"

To be continued... ◆ **Ryan Scott**

Ryan Scott

GFW's intrepid reviews editor spends his nights hurtling through the wild space of *Eve Online*. He still thinks *Star Trek* is for losers, though.

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BATTLEFIELD 2142 (DEMO)

This demo features the Sidi Power Plant map, two playable armies (the European Union and Pan Asian Coalition), the new Titan mode, and the popular Conquest mode.

F.E.A.R.: EXTRACTION POINT (DEMO)

The first expansion pack for the spooky first-person shooter *F.E.A.R.* is H.E.R.E. Check out some of the new weapons, enemies, and locations in this single-player demo.

STAR WARS: EMPIRE AT WAR: FORCES OF CORRUPTION (DEMO)

Take the new *Empire at War* expansion for a spin. Play the role of Tyber Zann on a quest to retake your criminal empire.

DARK MESSIAH OF MIGHT AND MAGIC (DEMO)

Becometh thee a warrior, mage, or assassin in this single-player demo of Ubisoft's Source-powered mighty, magical first-person adventure.

HEROES OF ANNIHILATED EMPIRES (DEMO)

Real-time strategy and role-playing unite! Try out two different races, an extensive single-player mission, and the LAN-playable skirmish mode.

PREY V1.2 (PATCH)

This update tackles some bug issues that plagued the game—and also adds new maps and multiplayer models for you to enjoy.

COMPANY OF HEROES V1.2 (PATCH)

This *Company of Heroes* patch addresses SLI (scalable-link interface) issues, squashes a few bugs, and kills some pesky exploits.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE-EARTH II V1.05 (PATCH)

Apparently, all is not well in Middle-earth—luckily, this patch tweaks a bunch of units, fixes some maps, and tunes up the interface a bit. Check out our full review on page 116.

SPACE EMPIRES V (DEMO)

Explore, expand, exploit, and exterminate across the big, scary expanse of the cosmos in this demo of the latest game in the *Space Empires* 4X space sim series.

FLYBOYS SQUADRON (DEMO)

Movie-based games typically suck. Vehicle-based MMOs typically tank. Can this WWI flying MMO turn the tide? Try the trial version.

AGE OF EMPIRES III V1.09 (PATCH)

Among the many tweaks in this *Empires*-building patch: bonus XP for faster leveling.

HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC V V1.03 (PATCH)

More fixes and tweaks? Check. Map editor? Check. Four new maps? Hell yeah.

LEGO STAR WARS II V1.01 (PATCH)

If you have trouble installing LucasArts' blocky take on the original *Star Wars* trilogy, don't use the Force—use this patch.

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A LETTER FROM PETER MOORE

The latest developments in the Games for Windows world

As our friends at Ziff Davis and the 1UP Network roll out the very first issue of *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine*, I want to welcome you and tell you about the exciting developments happening in the Games for Windows world.

First, we are extremely excited to be working with the Ziff Davis and the 1UP Network team. When we decided Microsoft Windows needed its own official games magazine, we talked to a lot of folks in the industry. We wanted a strong and independent voice for the platform, one that wouldn't be afraid to tell it like it is, whether we liked it or not. Jeff Green and his team really stood out, and now that we've arrived at the first issue, we couldn't be happier with our choice. I think you'll really like what the *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine* team has in store for you. It's a beautiful, informative, and irreverent publication worthy of its heritage.

Next, I want to give you a brief preview of what we've been cooking up in Redmond for Games for Windows. As you may have heard, Microsoft is rededicating itself to our first gaming platform: Windows. Make no mistake—Windows is a first-class gaming platform. As the platform owner, we're going to treat it that way.

We've been working on this for a while, and you'll see the fruits of our efforts in retail stores across the U.S. and on the packaging of the best games on the platform. We're working closely with our friends in the industry to make sure you get quality games that are more user-friendly and fun than ever before. We're addressing many of the problems you've complained about over the years—the installation process, confusing system requirements, game quality, lack of standardized game controllers, and so on. As you'll see in the next three pages and on our website (www.gamesforwindows.com), we're taking a stand for the business and the platform with our Games for Windows initiative, and you, the gamer, will benefit.

I also am very excited for our next release, Windows Vista. For the first time, we approached Windows from a gamer's perspective, and I think you'll see why when you get Windows Vista. We've created a place in the operating system, the Games Explorer, where you can find, play, and learn more about your games. We built Windows Vista on DirectX 9, which your games will use in a more integrated way with the operating system, and all applications can now take advantage of the world's leading graphics technology.

But we didn't stop there. Windows Vista will also ship with DirectX 10, which delivers the cutting edge in graphics and realism. We're working hard with our friends at Electronic Arts, THQ, Namco Bandai, and others to make sure you get great DirectX 10 games early next year. DirectX 10 will deliver the most realistic, immersive, and intense game experiences you've ever seen on Windows—you'll see what I mean when you play *Crysis*, *Company of Heroes*, and *Hellgate: London* on Windows Vista and DirectX 10 hardware.

We're also bringing the power and community of Xbox Live to Windows in two Microsoft Game Studios titles that will be exclusive to Windows Vista: *Shadowrun* and *Halo 2 for Windows Vista*. These games will deliver the quality online experience you've come to expect on Xbox 360 to Windows Vista, and *Shadowrun* will even allow you to play against Xbox 360 players in a true first for both platforms.

It's obviously an exciting time to be a Windows gamer, and I welcome you to *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine*. Enjoy!

Peter Moore
Corporate Vice President; Interactive Entertainment Business, Entertainment and Devices Division; Microsoft Corporation

INDUSTRY BUZZ

Microsoft Announces World's Greatest Gaming Platform

"Microsoft is responding in force with Games for Windows, an initiative that includes strong visual branding, a more uniform appearance for game boxes, and even Games for Windows–branded hardware.

"The [Games for Windows retail] display was incredibly effective, using the Windows logo, classic Microsoft fonts, and uniform packaging to communicate that Windows isn't just the world's most popular operating system—it's also its ubiquitous gaming platform."

–Logan Decker, *PC Gamer*, August 1, 2006

"Shopping for PC games is a little more difficult (at least in terms of shelf browsing) due to no visual mark telling the consumer what hardware requirements the game has and a lack of standardized box sizes for easy browsing. Now Microsoft hopes to change all that."

–Blake Snow, Joystiq

"You may have heard about Microsoft wanting to underline its commitment to PC gaming now [that] it has clearly established itself as a contender in the console marketplace. Its way of doing this is to release a 'Games for Windows' brand."

–Matthew, Geek.com

"The Games for Windows brand is more than an aesthetic change...In order for a game to garnish the brand, a strict set of technical guidelines that ensure consumers have a consistent, reliable gaming experience on Windows XP and Vista must be met."

–James Orry, Pro-G

"On top of standard guidelines, there is standard packaging, which looks pretty secksy!"

–"bapenguin," Evil Avatar

Games for Windows®

PC gaming gets a new look (and we think it's hot!)

Over the next few months, a major transformation will take place across top retail stores in the U.S., including frontrunners Wal-Mart, CompUSA, and Circuit City. No longer will PC games resemble a Wild, Wild West of scattered towns and lawless revelry. Finally, PC games will become a cohesive category, recognizable and well-defined against the backdrop of console titles and other "productivity" software.

At the helm of this transformation is Microsoft Corporation who, with strong support from leading publishers, hardware manufacturers, OEMs, and aforementioned retail partners, is seeking to unify the PC games category in a way that it has never seen. There had always been a terrific depth and breadth of exciting PC games for all ages and players. What was missing from the equation was the energy to create and support technical standards that would bring clarity to the PC games experience. Microsoft recognized this as an opportunity to provide consumers with a technical guarantee on PC games that would ensure a high-quality and easy-to-use gaming experience on Windows. Enter: Games for Windows.

While Games for Windows had been around for several years, most consumers equated the logo with Windows compatibility. And that was it. Neither treated strongly as a brand nor thought of as a quality mark, Games for Windows underwent a major facelift starting in 2005. Today, Games for Windows is fast becoming a deeply developed brand, appearing on highly popular titles such as *LEGO® Star Wars® II: The Original Trilogy* (LucasArts), *Company of Heroes* (THQ), and *Microsoft Flight Simulator X* (Microsoft Game Studios). But, what, you may ask yourself, does it *mean?*

Games for Windows represent four key standards:

1. **QUALITY:** Games for Windows–branded titles undergo extensive testing—and not only by the publisher. Microsoft also plays a role in quality-checking each title to ensure it meets performance and reliability standards on a Windows PC.

2. **COMPATIBILITY:** There are many meanings to compatibility. Games for Windows–branded titles are compatible in many ways, including the following: a) titles are compatible with Windows-based PCs, both 32- and 64-bit versions; b) titles that use accessories, work with the Xbox 360 Controller for Windows—and, in 2007, you can add to this a number of Xbox wireless accessories as well by way of the Xbox 360 Wireless Gaming Receiver for Windows; c) titles are compatible with the widescreen format; d) titles are guaranteed to exploit the Games Explorer and Parental Controls, new features appearing on Microsoft's highly anticipated new operating system, Windows Vista.

3 **SAFETY:** Parents can rest easy knowing that the Games for Windows brand is an assurance that branded titles will support game ratings as well as simple-to-use parental controls on Windows Vista.

4 **EASY TO PLAY:** We all remember that fateful day when we couldn't find that special game. Remembering file path names is akin to remembering your girlfriend's/mother's/neighbor's birthday; sometimes, it just doesn't happen. Fortunately, Games for Windows–branded titles are easy to install, find, and remove, particularly in Windows Vista, where all of these titles install directly into the Games Explorer and into your Media Center so that they're easily accessible from whichever UI you are using. Additionally, *using* the new gaming features in Windows Vista, such as the Games Explorer and Parental Controls, is a no-brainer (more on this in next month's issue of *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine*).

By developing an easily recognizable brand on a foundation of high quality standards, Games for Windows ultimately promises consumers, first and foremost, a *fun* games experience. Being able to let go of previously common frustrations, consumers can be confident Games for Windows–branded titles will work reliably, won't give you compatibility issues (where it counts), and are customizable for parents who want to create a safer gaming environment for the family.

What's more, Games for Windows promises even more thrilling titles after the holidays, including *Crysis* (EA), *Hellgate: London* (Namco Bandai), *The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar* (Turbine and Midway), *Age of Conan: The Hyborian Adventures* (Eidos), *Supreme Commander* (THQ), and *Halo 2 for Windows Vista* (Microsoft Game Studios). And the list just keeps growing....

So far, the industry has embraced the Games for Windows efforts; this holiday, analysts, bloggers, and partners alike are rejoicing in this new evolution in PC games. You, too, can see it for yourself this holiday at Circuit City, Wal-Mart, or CompUSA. And have fun playing.

❑ Xbox 360 Wireless Controller for Windows

"Microsoft has today [September 18, 2006] unveiled its new Games for Windows PC software branding and associated packaging, as another step to emphasize the company's ramped-up pledge of support to the PC gaming market."

–Jason Dobson, Gamasutra

"I say great job to MS for being the ones to step up and try to fix PC gaming. This is definitely going to help games get released with fewer bugs and better compatibility. [I] can't wait for all the MS haters to start scratching the bottom of the barrel for reasons not to do this."

–Korban, Shacknews community member response to Shacknews post

NVIDIA GEFORCE 8 GPUS AND DIRECTX 10 TAKE GAMING TO NEW LEVELS OF REALISM

World's first DirectX 10 GPU features the world's first unified shader architecture, enabling unmatched gaming performance, graphics realism, and real-time, film-quality effects!

Based on the revolutionary new GeForce 8 graphics architecture, the powerful new NVIDIA GeForce 8800 GTX and NVIDIA GeForce 8800 GTS GPUs (Graphics Processing Units) are the industry's first DirectX 10 (DX 10) compatible GPUs, delivering incredible 3D graphics performance and image quality to gamers ready for maximum eye candy and amazing Extreme High Definition (XHD) game performance. More importantly, by providing developers with the world's first DirectX 10 GPU, NVIDIA continues to drive innovation for visually rich gaming.

Microsoft Corporation is taking a dramatic new approach with DirectX in Windows Vista, rebuilding it from the ground up to enable a rich, incredibly detailed experience for users while delivering up to five times the graphics performance of DX 9. New features in DX 10 allow games to more efficiently use today's powerful GPUs to their fullest potential, while freeing up the central processing unit (CPU). GeForce 8 GPUs implement these features to relieve many of the constraints and problems of pre-DX 10 classic graphics pipelines.

DX 10 enables game developers to render more unique onscreen objects, such as trees with individually modeled leaves, or fields with individual blades of grass. A new DX10 pipeline stage called the "geometry shader" sits between the vertex and pixel shader stages. Programs using the geometry shader stage can implement powerful new effects adding to scene and character realism, while performing various geometry operations directly on the GPU without having to rely on the CPU.

The graphics system in DX 10 is extremely flexible, allowing it to offload the CPU for a number of tasks better suited for the GPU. The immediate benefit to this is that games will look much more impressive, with realistic scenes, increased character detail, more objects, vegetation, shadow effects, natural silhouettes, and lifelike animations. Offloading tasks to the GPU frees up clock cycles that the CPU can allocate to other tasks, such as artificial intelligence in games. And over time, GPUs are likely to take on even more compute-intensive tasks, such as physics processing.

GeForce 8 GPUs include all required hardware functionality defined in the Microsoft Direct3D 10 specification, with full support for the DX 10 unified shader instruction set and Shader Model 4 capabilities. With DX 10 GPUs, developers are presented with a consistent feature set, so there is no need to optimize or remove features for different GPUs. Developers can focus on building one code path and be sure that every DX10 card will be able to support it. The GeForce 8800 GTX is not only the first shipping a DX 10 GPU, but it is also the reference GPU for DX 10 API development and certification.

The release of the GeForce 8 Series of GPUs and the upcoming launch of Microsoft Windows Vista and DirectX 10 mark a new era in gaming. DX 10 is the first step in reducing the cost of games development while turning the graphics card into a multipurpose processor. NVIDIA GeForce 8 series GPUs allow game developers to test their code on DX 10 hardware now, dramatically accelerating the time to market for DX 10 games. By incorporating these GPUs into game development workstations, game developers can utilize the full power of NVIDIA graphics and the advanced programmability of DX 10 to redefine your gaming experience.

1UP.com and Electronic Gaming Monthly magazine present…

3 Weeks of Halo 3

3 full weeks of coverage, featuring blogs, analysis, opinion, in-depth stories, an exclusive **Electronic Gaming Monthly cover story**, and **1UP.com's hands-on impressions** of Microsoft's most important game ever!

We came. We saw. We played it.

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Halo3.1UP.com

And read the full story inside Electronic Gaming Monthly magazine—on stands Nov. 14

1UP NETWORK

COMBAT BRIEFS

The holidays are almost here, and you know what that means: running to the local Best Buy at 2 a.m. after Thanksgiving dinner to fight for a sale-deal PC; making a list of gifts to mooch from loved ones. It's also the perfect opportunity to reward the person you love most—yourself. And what says "Happy Holidays" better than new computer peripherals?

We could just mail it in with a list of sweet-ass gear that only Bill Gates could afford—"Buy this! Consume that! You need to own two of these graphics cards and dual 30-inch monitors if you have any hope of being cool!"—but you get that from enough places already. What you need is a straight shooter in your corner to not only recommend good gear, but also tell you what you *don't* need. Well, friends, that's what you got right here.

These next few pages are garlic for all the bloodsucking retailers that want to upsell you the most expensive stuff in the store. We're going to tell you exactly the kind of gear you should avoid buying—or at least make you ask yourself, "Do I really need to get this before 2007?"

We'll even tell you what we prefer to rock in our own homes and offices.

You're welcome. **Darren Gladstone**

Q: WHAT SAYS "HAPPY HOLIDAYS" BETTER THAN NEW COMPUTER PERIPHERALS?

ILLUSTRATION BY MONTE BEILL THURBER

NO-BS GUIDE TO

What to buy (and what not to buy) for the holidays

INSIDE

Hard News
The skinny on DirectX 10 and a chance to win a custom notebook!

Tech Medics
Your PC in the ER? Loyd Case is on call. Now turn and cough.

KEYBOARDS

Until we get all cyberpunk and implant data jacks into our heads, mankind will require keyboards. Still, nobody wants a standard-issue blah beige model that gets packed in with mom's 'puter. Luckily, a whole aftermarket full of options awaits you. Here's a handy checklist of features you'll see in stores—and whether or not you should really care.

MULTIMEDIA CONTROLS AND SHORTCUT KEYS. Don't take these for granted. We use the volume control knob on our keyboards almost as often as the spacebar.

USB HUB. Any good keyboard is going to have at least one extra USB port—anything to avoid getting out of your chair to plug in peripherals!

WIRELESS. Some people really want to avoid the clutter of wires, but we don't see the use. How far are you really traveling from your PC, anyhow? Still, if you insist on cutting cords, make sure that your keyboard lasts a while between batteries—and buy a set of AA Energizer rechargeables, stat!

TOUCHY-FEELY. They call it "touch typing" for a reason—and if you don't like the feel of your keyboard, then what? Online ordering is convenient, sure, but it's better to go to the local CompUSA and test-drive your potential purchase. After all, you try on a pair of shoes before you buy 'em, don't you?

GIMMICKS. Some gaming keyboards have separate key layouts for games. Take the Zboard, which offers a different pop-off keyboard top for multiple popular games. If you're a n00b (or just like to play a lot of *World of WarCraft*), the gimmick board might be worth it. Just remember there's no scientific proof that a game-specific keyboard will make your life any easier. >

HOW WE ROLL

LOGITECH G11

This is a keyboard with a map style [illegible] the G11 [illegible] gamer[illegible] [illegible] programmable macros, [illegible] multimedia [illegible] and keys that [illegible]

PC HARDWARE

MICE

Everybody and their mother has tried to reinvent the mouse wheel, and more than anything else in our holiday guide, this is the one category that ultimately boils down to personal preference. Hopefully these hints will help you figure out what your preference is.

EXTRA BUTTONS. Yeah, yeah, yeah—you get left and right buttons and a scroll wheel, that's just fine but trust us, even just one extra button by the thumb can work wonders. The only trick: Can you comfortably hit that button without being a yoga master?

DOWN WITH THE DPI. Don't be a slave to numbers. Most mice are plenty fast and will work on just about any surface—unless you're dumb enough to try playing on a mirror or glass panel.

LEFTIST. Southpaws get no respect, but a few nice mice out there—such as the old Microsoft IntelliMouse Explorer—support both lefties and righties.

WEIGHT WATCHERS. Anybody play darts? Hardcore players own specially weighted darts. The same concept holds for gaming mice: a love-or-hate deal that depends on how much you want to load down your hand.

MACROMANIA. Some mouse makers cram RAM inside mice. Others put software on the PC. Just ask yourself: "Do I really need mouse-based shortcut keys?"

WIRELESS. Unlike wireless keyboards, this is a totally valid gaming option—especially if you like throwing stuff at people who beat you. Just make sure that any mouse you buy comes with rechargeable batteries.

TOUCHY-FEELY. Like a keyboard, you really need to lay your hands on any mouse before you buy it. Some have rubberized textures and some fit snugly in your hand—but not every one.

GIMMICKS. There are tons of little gimmicks to watch out for here. While we can't wait to check out crazy new gear like the revolutionary Novint Falcon 3D controller, we'll have to settle for the little things right now—like the ability to adjust speed sensitivity on the mouse.

Oh, and one last word of warning: you know those "gaming surfaces" you see for $70-plus? They're just mouse pads for suckers.

MONITORS

You don't go out and buy a new monitor very often, so when you do, you gotta make it count. CRTs are pretty much going the way of cassette tapes, so learn to embrace the future—and a good LCD display in the process.

THE SKINNY ON WIDESCREEN. These days, don't settle for a standard 4:3 aspect ratio display. Widescreen is where it's at, and every game that carries the "Games for Windows" label is required to support widescreen—and most developers are doing it anyway. So, basically, "all the kids are doing it"—plus you get to watch movies the way they were made.

RESOLUTIONS. The only resolution that should matter to you is the display's advertised native resolution. That is the best and likely the only resolution that you'll want to run your games at. Can your current graphics card support that resolution? Will your games? Try to shoot for a minimum of 1650x1080.

SIZE MATTERS. Avoid anything smaller than 20 inches. The sweet spot in price and performance seems to be the new 22-inch, 1650x1080 displays.

EVERY MONITOR'S A SNOWFLAKE. Because of the way monitors are manufactured, no two will ever be alike. There might be a dead pixel here or there, or a slight difference in colors.

SEE THE LIGHT. Everything looks great on the computer-store show floor with its optimal fluorescent lighting, but how will that display look at home? Make certain that the store you buy your display from has a reasonable (i.e., "any reason!") return policy.

NEED FOR SPEED. Many monitors these days advertise a speed in milliseconds (ms). The closer that number is to zero, the better. Honestly, though, anything around 8ms or less (which covers most LCD displays these days) will do ya fine.

BRIGHTNESS AND GLARE. Turn down the brightness on your monitor. Most displays' factory default is a little too high. Use the bundled software (if provided) to adjust it. Also, glass screens work great in dark rooms but can cause glare elsewhere.

CABLES. Does the monitor come with the cables you need? That's a corner many companies cut—and DVI don't come cheap.

GRAPHICS

A good monitor's nothing if you don't have a good graphics card driving it. You probably fall into one of two categories: You already have your graphics cards covered and you're riding out the storm until DirectX 10, or you desperately need something right now.

DON'T BUY ANYTHING YET! No joke. ATI and Nvidia probably will burn this page out of every issue on newsstands, but check it. DirectX 10 is right around the corner. As we go to press, you can only buy DirectX 9.0c cards. Want to get the most out of Vista—and *Crysis*? Hang in there, because the first few DirectX 10 cards could be sneaking onto store shelves very soon.

ADDENDUM TO WHAT WE JUST SAID! If you absolutely need to get something right now and you don't mind getting a DX9-only board, we suggest EVGA's e-GeForce 7600 GT CO. Just don't get suckered into buying the current top dogs—you'll probably just want an "interim" card for now. After all, there will be plenty of $400 DX10-capable graphics cards in a couple of months. If you spend any more than $200 on a current-gen graphics card at this point, you're what we in the business call "a dumbass."

WONDER TWINS. There's a lot of talk about Nvidia's SLI (Scalable Link Interface) and ATI's CrossFire dual-card setups—but in our experience, it's not worth buying two cards for a single computer. Just worry about hitting the native resolution of your monitor (see "Monitors," left, for more on that) and getting the most bang for your buck from your card. Another thing to keep in mind if you double your pleasure is that you won't have much room left on the motherboard for anything else. So much for that sound card....

FIGHT THE POWER. You'll probably need a good-size power supply in your PC to run a good graphics card. Make sure that you've got at least 500W under the hood.

A GOOD MONITOR MEANS NOTHING WITHOUT THE RIGHT GRAPHICS CARD.

HOW WE ROLL

LOGITECH G7 LASER

This mouse's new $100 cousin, the MX Revolution, kicks much ass, but c'mon—100 bones for a friggin' mouse? We still like this wireless mouse because it's slightly weighted and comes with two rechargeable batteries and a built-in speed-tweaking control. Now if only it had a rubbery texture.

HOW WE ROLL

DELL 3007WFP

We get heady with power when staring headlong into Dell's 30-inch abyss of a monitor. The native 2560x1600 resolution eclipses small pets, but you probably won't miss 'em anyway. If you have $2,000 to spare, this is a simply gorgeous display. If you're not a pampered tech editor, a good 22-incher can run about $600.

HOW WE ROLL

ATI RADEON X1900

We drive our 30-inch monitor relatively problem-free thanks to this mighty little card (and it's not even in CrossFire). Wait, did we say little? This sucker has a Dyson vacuum attached. These cards still aren't what we'd call "cheap," mind you, but we will continue to hold out until the first good DX10 card shows up.

SOUND

The first question you need to ask yourself right now is: "Do I give a damn whether or not I'm going to annoy the neighbors?" That's going to help set the course for your audio decisions.

AUDIO SNOB? It's impossible to get a proper in-store audio test. Ask about a store return policy first and check it at home. The best way: classical music. The bass should be rich, not hollow; mids and highs should be crisp, not tinny. Now go eat some caviar, ya jerk.

ROCK THE HOUSE! If you have a monster monitor and actually use your PC for a whole lot more than games—y'know, to cuddle up and watch a movie in front of a 30-inch screen—consider a monstrous audio setup to match. Maybe a 7.1 speaker system will cut it in your home if you don't mind potentially tripping over speaker wires. Alternatively, Creative Labs' GigaWorks ProGamer G550W 5.1 system tries a slightly different approach. The rear satellite speakers connect wirelessly via a 2.4GHz frequency and all things considered, the G550W still manages to deliver a sonic soul-punch.

A GOOD PAIR OF CANS. Headphones, that is. Maybe you're considerate. More likely you just want to shut out the real world for a couple minutes. There are many things to consider when it comes to headphones....

HOW'S YOUR HEAD? Make sure they're snug but won't cut off circulation. Also, make sure that cloth-covered headphones won't overheat your head. They won't do much good if you need to take 'em off every five minutes.

DO I NEED A HEADSET? If you game online, the answer's probably yes. If so, some headsets offer detachable mics while others shove 'em right up in your face. The closer the mic is to your grill the more distorted your voice gets.

DO I NEED A SOUNDCARD? Every PC nowadays comes with at least half-decent audio. The problem is that, if you rely on onboard audio, you can experience a slight performance drop. Play high-fidelity games with 5.1 audio output? Do you chat up plans of attack in *Battlefield 2*? Consider a dedicated soundcard.

HOW WE ROLL:

CREATIVE LABS SOUND BLASTER X-FI FATAL1TY CARD WITH RAZER BARRACUDA HP-1 HEADPHONES

We're eight months late, and the X-Fi card for certain the audio performance PC crown (Audigy 2 Platinum eX) won't easily as of press time); the USB powered headphones deliver stellar bass. They ain't cheap, though.

WI-FI

Going wireless is a big step. Hell, that could be the subject of an entire magazine. But since we've got a bunch of other stuff to talk about, here are the bare-bones basics.

802.11G VS. 802.11N. 802.11g is the current standard for all wireless data transmission. 802.11n—that's the future. Unfortunately, 11n won't be finalized until early 2007. So all those big promises you're seeing from 11n wireless routers on store shelves right now? They're just a wee bit premature. Besides, 11g will cover everything you need.

WHY?-FI. Here's something to consider if you're really pinching pennies or you haven't bought a wireless router yet: Do you actually need one? If you have a notebook PC or any Wi-Fi–ready devices, you already know the answer's "yes." If not, consider waiting until the 11n standard gets ratified next year.

HOW WE ROLL:

LINKSYS WRT54GX

Unless you're dreaming an elven LAN parties or have many people competing for bandwidth, you're just wasting good money with some wireless gaming–specific router.

CPU

For the past few years, the choice has been simple when it comes to CPUs: AMD all the way; apply rubber stamp, and move onto the next category. However, Intel sucka-punched AMD with its new Core 2 Duo processors.

THE KING IS DEAD! Intel, welcome back to the top of the heap. That is, until AMD fights back with some crazy new tech. In the meantime, every gamer worth his WASD knows to go Core 2 Duo.

DON'T BUY THE BEST. Ye-huhwhat? You heard us. Don't drop coin on the most ludicrous, top-end CPU right away. You got that $1,000 to burn? Just so you know, Intel's "middle-of-the-road" E6600 only costs about $350 and will deliver some damn fine in-game performance.

IF THE CPU DON'T FIT.... We know you know this, but remember that not all motherboards are created equal. Can your PC handle the new CPU? All Core 2 Duo PC builders: Try out the ASUS P5B Deluxe motherboard.

HOW WE ROLL:

INTEL CORE DUO 2 E6600

Some need to vary. And some do. Maybe, but it never felt so good to be bad. Later, we know AMD is going to fire back soon enough, but Intel is the current speed king.

NEW TECHNOLOGY

Other peripherals running the gamut from optical drives to network cards make all sorts of promises about improving your experience. The following gear defies simple categorization for two reasons: 1) It's still too new to fully test in time for this issue. 2) We still need a little time before we can fully recommend anything.

In other words, you'll see this stuff on store shelves—and while it may sound good (or goofy) on paper, we at least want to let you know the deal.

PHYSICS CARDS

The idea behind AGEIA's PhysX card is a solid one. Hardware that can run circles around Havok's software-based physics? Thousands of objects that you can manipulate onscreen at once? It's on, baby!

However, when 3D cards first appeared 10 years ago, a few killer games had to come along before people actually understood the reason to buy additional hardware. And that's where physics card technology is right now. *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter, Rise of Legends*, and *City of Heroes* ain't enough for a glowing recommendation just yet. Nevertheless, considering that the technology is built into the Unreal Engine 3, the future of PhysX looks pretty good, as many games now use UE3. Our advice: Hold out for some of those new big guns to come along to see just what the tech can do.

KILLER NIC CARD

Windows chugs along, hogging resources and precious ping time—it can spell the difference between a PC gamer's life and death. We understand the need for a good network card, but Bigfoot Networks' Killer NIC promises a lot, optimizing packet performance for gaming by working outside of Windows. In fact, a 400MHz Linux CPU runs the show, actually improving game performance as well as online speed. Want to multitask? A separate USB 2.0 port on the board lets you program apps to take advantage of it. Download huge files in the background while playing online, for example. That sounds great, except the drivers aren't final as of press time. Initial tests are looking good—but the crashes upon shutdown don't. Also, 270 bucks for a NIC is a bit much. Stay tuned for more on Killer.

BLU-RAY/HD-DVD DRIVES

Don't bother getting a Blu-ray or HD-DVD drive for your PC just yet. All that storage space might seem sweet, but current units are typical "first wave" products: They're slow DVD and CD burners, and not especially fast at the BD-ROM (Blu-ray) and HD-DVD stuff, either. And we didn't even get into the prices. The drives themselves cost more than some PCs. You still want to be an early adopter? Didn't think so.

HARD NEWS

The bleeding edge of tech

THE DIRECTX DEAL

Windows Vista is coming. At some point. Microsoft swears. No, really. And with Vista comes DirectX 10. We were originally hoping to batter you with numbers to explain exactly what you can expect out of games that support DX10. Unfortunately, DX10-friendly graphics cards didn't arrive in time for this issue—but, as they say, "A picture is worth a thousand words." So check out these screens from *Microsoft Flight Simulator X* until we can give you some concrete results.

DIRECTX 9.0C
This is what the game would look like if you were to install it on your Windows XP rig this afternoon. Looks nice enough, right? You lousy ingrates, always wanting more.

DIRECTX 10
According to a Microsoft spokesperson, this half of the screenshot is merely an artist's rendition of what *Flight Simulator X* will look like in DirectX 10—so that's all we've got to go off for now. The telltale signs that DirectX 10 will deliver: the cloudy sky with light bending through; the grassy blades creating foamy waves; the subtler reflections in the water; and the emerald forest. How does one achieve such graphical splendor? Here's the relatively "quick" explanation from David Blythe, software architect for Microsoft's graphics platforms unit.

"Applications can send a lot more material changes or changes to the description of geometry a lot more frequently. But that doesn't show up as a 'bullet point' feature, like 'oh, flip this switch and you get better performance.' It underpins the design.

"And then there are a lot of things about feature consistency in hardware implementations that allow developers an easier job of targeting a wider variety of platforms. That doesn't show up as any single feature, but it's a big deal to get agreement on what this common set of features is.

"When you start getting into individual features—things like adding an integer instruction set—the new geometry shader is a fairly big deal. In terms of adding that in the middle of the pipeline and having access to all the parameters of a primitive—for example, the three vertices of a triangle or the two endpoints of a line—and being able to operate on that as a whole, [it] sort of changes the game. There are things that we've done where part of the objective was to make it possible to do more processing on the GPU and to do this in a way where there wasn't a lot of mediation that needed to be done on the CPU. So you can do iterative types of computations on the GPU without having to return data to the CPU, do a little bit more work there, and then return the data to the GPU."

Of course, no one says, "Wow! Look at the interactive instructions in that screenshot!" All you need concern yourself with for now is that DirectX 10 is Vista-only, and that the first DX10-ready cards are almost here. Once they arrive, we'll let you know the score. 2007—and the DX10-rocking *Crysis*—can't come soon enough.•

XTRAS

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TECH MEDICS

Loyd Case has the cure for your ailing PC

Q: I'm playing *EverQuest II* with two identical PCs sharing a 6MB high-speed Internet connection through a D-Link GamerLounge. The PCs each have two EVGA 7600 GS video-cards in SLI mode (I'm running the game at 1024x768 resolution), Pentium D 3GHz CPUs, and 1GB of RAM. Is there any way I can eliminate or reduce the lag I'm getting?

Frank

A: Ah, lag—the ever-present problem that plagues almost all MMORPGs.

Have you tried changing servers? One of the main issues with lag is the distance and number of "hops" it takes to get from your system to the server you're using. While many MMORPG companies have gotten smarter about distributing their servers geographically, the number of hops can still be pretty large.

Some technologies attempt to minimize lag in gaming. Ubicom builds hardware and software that goes into routers for prioritizing network packets. Products like the D-Link DGL-4300G router and the Hawking HB81 Broadband Booster incorporate Ubicom tech. Nvidia's latest nForce 570 and 590 chipsets also have packet prioritization. Then you have Bigfoot Networks' Killer Network Interface Card, which only recently hit the market. We're still running early tests on the Killer card, but it promises improved game performance and greatly reduced lag by operating outside of the Windows stack. Maybe that can help some, but ultimately, the problem may lie outside your network. Stay tuned for more on that one.

Q: I've been upgrading my computer in bits and pieces over the past five years, but when my new laptop came in and beat my desktop's 3DMark score by nearly triple, I realized it was time to upgrade. I'm anxious to start planning the new rig, but my only concern is whether or not I should wait for DirectX 10–capable graphics cards. I don't want to make this serious investment only to have it become largely obsolete in a short time—but I also don't want to wait around if this next step forward isn't as groundbreaking as I've heard. Should I go ahead and build my new rig around XP and DX9, or should I wait until the release of Vista and DX10 next year?

Aaron Williams

A: If the framerate in *Company of Heroes* looks like a slideshow of your great uncle's experiences in World War II, you should go ahead and upgrade. After all, a current-generation processor, motherboard, and memory will still work great under Vista. Be aware, though, that some games you have now may simply not run well under Vista, though game compatibility has been getting a lot better with each beta release of the new OS.

The catch here, as you note, is the graphics cards. DirectX 10–capable hardware is just around the corner. But those first cards will almost certainly be $500-plus monsters, and the early drivers may have some teething problems. You might want to consider getting a decent midrange card, such as an Nvidia 7900 GS or 7950 GT, then wait for prices for DX10 hardware and driver issues to settle down a bit. DirectX 10 will offer substantial improvements in capability, but it's likely that game support won't be widespread for a year or so anyway.

Q: Is there a high-end videocard that will support a resolution of 1920x1080 (the native resolution of my 37-inch LCD HDTV monitor) that does not ship with a fan. I am putting together an HTPC (home-theater personal computer) and would like to keep it as quiet as possible. Any help would be appreciated.

Gordon Rick

A: Not a big fan of the noise, eh? Fanless videocards do exist, ranging from very low-end to fairly high-performance boards. How successfully they work depends on the cooling that exists inside your PC case. You still need some way to exhaust heat out of the case. Zalman, a Korean manufacturer of PC cases, actually builds fan-free PC cases, but they're very heavy, very expensive, and don't look good in a home-theater rack.

So an HTPC will likely have some fans, but if it has one or more slow-turning fans on the back of the case, then the noise level will be minimum. One of the best recent fanless videocards is XFX's spiffy, passively cooled 7950 GT, which offers good game performance, supports HDCP out of the DVI port, and is completely silent.●

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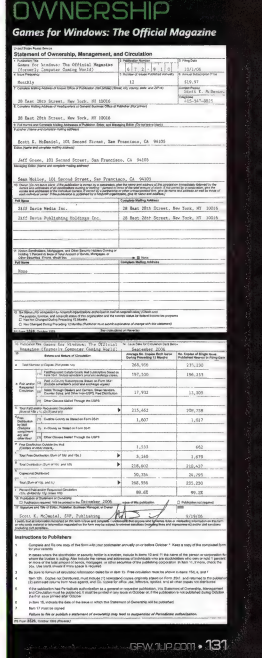

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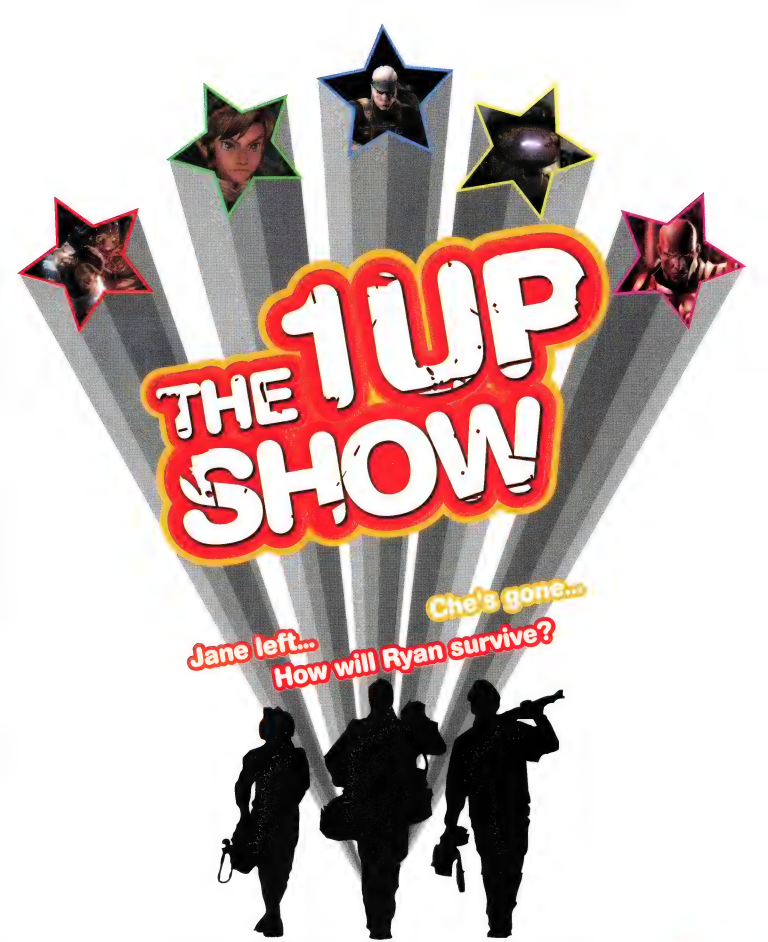

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FEAR AND LOATHING FOR WINDOWS

Or, how I learned to stop worrying and love Internet Explorer

COLUMN

Bill Gates was driving *waaaay* too fast. I was in the backseat, listening to Motörhead on my shiny new Zune. We were heading down I-5, on our way to Vegas after losing our minds together in Los Angeles.

"Hey, Mr. Gates!" I yelled (because that's what he lets me call him now), "toss me another one of those Mr. Pibbs!"

"You've had enough already, dude!" he cackled, flinging a can my way.

"No, sir! This party is just getting started."

"I feel you, bro," he replied.

OK, so I guess I kind of made that up. Not the part about calling him "Mr. Gates," though. I mean, in the unlikely event (especially after this) that I should ever actually get to meet him, I'm sure that's exactly how I'll be greeting him. Though the temptation to call him "G-Dog," "Billdo," or "Marvin O'Gravel Balloon Face" might get the better of me.

The point is, actually, that I don't know the guy. Nor do I know hardly anyone at Microsoft. So though this magazine has the fine (and quite eye-catching!) Microsoft logo on the front, and though we are the official magazine of their recently christened Games for Windows platform—a fancy-pants way of saying PC gaming, minus the annoying Linux and Mac noise—neither I nor any of the other editors or artists on this staff work for or get paid one cent by Microsoft. Who we work for is Ziff Davis Media in San Francisco, in offices that we share with the staffs of 1UP.com, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, and *Official PlayStation Magazine*—fine entities all, and ones you should definitely check out if you haven't yet, because they are good and good for you and will help put hair on your chest. (I am speaking to the ladies here.)

Uh, anyway, the reason I am wasting valuable space here, when we really should be talking about more pressing issues—like why it is that I find the slave Princess Leia in *Lego Star Wars II* disturbingly hot—is that I need you to understand, here in issue No. 1, who we are and what we're about. Because I get it that that logo up front may confuse you a little.

First, in case you didn't know already, this isn't really issue No. 1 for those of us who actually made it. Until this month, we have been known as *Computer Gaming World* magazine, and we've been doing this for 25 years and 268 issues. Me, personally, I've been with the magazine since June 1996, making this my 116th issue in a row, something I should probably not think about further without my therapist present. Also, apropos of nothing, let it also be known that in all this time I have not managed to finish *Baldur's Gate II*, which is still on my hard drive.

This new identity of ours—*Games for Windows: The Official Magazine*—in addition to being a rather unwieldy mouthful of a name, also represents a quantum leap forward for this humble hobby of ours. It represents, among other things, Microsoft's somewhat belated realization that, while ably pursuing their home console entertainment plans with the Xbox and Xbox 360 over the past few years, they were already hosting a gaming platform that has been entertaining millions of gamers every single day: Windows. Their desire to push that platform forward, to take it seriously, coincided perfectly with our desire to take *CGW* to—to use a horribly clichéd term—the next level. And so this partnership was born.

But as I said up front: We're still us. We're not paid by Microsoft, told what to write by Microsoft, or subject to approval by Microsoft. And if they do things that we're not happy with—*LIKE NOT GIVING US* HALO WARS *ON THE PC, YOU BASTARDS*—I promise you we are going to call them on it, with, like, capital letters and italics and stuff. Our first and most important goal always was and ever will be to serve you guys and gals: gamers like us. The only issue that really concerns me about this whole deal is how to come up with an acronym for the mag that's shorter and easier to say than *GFW: TOM*. Yeeeeesh.

Before parting, however, I should say, in full disclosure, that despite everything I've just said, we did indeed go through a little corporate brainwashing. Nothing too extreme—think something along the lines of *The Manchurian Candidate* or whatever is going on in those secret CIA prisons, and you're on the right track. I can't really remember a whole lot about those sessions, nor can I explain what all these marks on my arm are, but I do know that I will never listen to my iPod again, I've uninstalled Firefox from my PC, and I think that, goshdurnit, Microsoft's *Zoo Tycoon 2* is the greatest game ever made. Also, I prefer to think of that screen on my PC now as the "blue screen of life."

So welcome aboard, folks! Whether it's your first issue or your 269th, I'm glad you're here. And I'm glad I'm here, too. Heck, I'm just glad about everything now I guess. See what happens when you join the Borg?● **Jeff Green**

Jeff Green

If you're interested in joining the collective, or perhaps buying some Florida swampland, e-mail jeff_green@ziffdavis.com today.

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